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Burning Demons and Sprinkling Mantras:
A History of Fire Sacrifice in South and Central Asia

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Religious Studies

by

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Holly Jane Grether

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ABSTRACT

Burning Demons and Sprinkling Mantras: A History of Fire Sacrifice in South and Central Asia

by

Holly Jane Grether

This project begins with the proposition that ‘Asian Ritual’ represents a more fundamental category of study than ‘Asian Religion.’ It investigates shared ritual technologies in Asian practice without being limited by the traditional sectarian and geographic categories that often characterize Religious Studies scholarship.

Fire sacrifice represents perhaps the oldest and most widespread of Asian practices. In various forms and religious contexts, it continues to provide meaning to millions of Asians worldwide. *Homa*, an apotropaic sacrifice that consists of burning various substances in a ritual fire, has had a particularly long and diverse history across a wide range of Asian regions and traditions. This project challenges the assumption that *homa* rites are Vedic in origin and argues, instead, that they developed out of a shared Indo-Iranian ritual paradigm. Then, it compares the ritual use of fire and water in three ‘ritual universes’—Vedic, Tantric, and Zoroastrian—to demonstrate that, though the ritual rules governing Asian fire rites have remained remarkably constant for millennia, these rules come to be appropriated in theologically specific ways.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
A. Maps and Boundaries: A Justification of the Study	2
B. Ritual Without Religion: Shared Asian Ritual Technologies	9
C. Chapter Overview	12
II. <i>Homa</i> : An Exemplary Asian Sacrifice	17
A. <i>Homa</i> in Japan	19
B. <i>Homa</i> in Chinese Sources	24
C. <i>Homa</i> in Tibetan Buddhism	28
D. <i>Homa</i> (<i>haoma</i>) in Iranian and Zoroastrian Sources	33
E. Contemporary <i>Homa</i> rites in South Asia	38
F. <i>Homa</i> in Vedic Literature	40
G. <i>Homa</i> as a Domestic Rite	43
H. <i>Homa</i> in Hindu Tantric and Medieval Sources	45
III. Indo-Iranian Origins of Tantric <i>Homa</i> Rites	52
A. Fire Rites in the Indo-Iranian Region	54
B. Indo-Iranian Origin of <i>Homa</i> 's Ritual Elements	56
C. Ritual Structure	58
D. Texts Pertaining to <i>Homa</i>	63

E. <i>Homa</i> Nomenclature	70
F. <i>Homa</i> Fires	78
G. <i>Homa</i> Substances	83
IV. Atharvanic Origins of Tantric <i>Homa</i> Rites	91
A. <i>Traividya</i> Plus One: The Position of the Atharva Veda in the Vedic Lexicon	94
B. <i>Atharvans</i> in the Avesta and the Atharva Veda	97
C. Vedic vs. Tantric	106
D. <i>Atharvanic</i> Rites	109
E. <i>Homa</i> in the <i>AV Pariśiṣṭas</i>	118
V. Battling Evil: Ritual Efficacy of <i>Homa</i> and <i>Yasna</i>	127
A. Enemies and Sacrifice in Early Vedic and Avestan Sources ...	128
B. Wizards	130
C. Witches	135
D. Enemies of Righteousness	139
E. Post-Vedic Demonology in the Indo-Iranian Landscape	142
F. Efficacy of <i>Homa</i> and <i>Yasna</i>	146
G. Ritual Battle against Māra in Buddhist Sources	149
H. <i>Grahas</i> and Sacrifice in Hindu Tantra	153
I. Demons and Sacrifice in Pahlavi Literature	155

VI. Burning Demons and Sprinkling Mantras: Fire and Water in Three 'Ritual Universes'	163
A. The Meaning of Meaninglessness	166
B. The Mind and Meaning	171
C. Fire and Water in a Zoroastrian Ritual Universe	176
D. Fire and Water in a Vedic Ritual Universe	190
E. Fire and Water in a Tantric Ritual Universe	203
F. Consecration and Initiation in Buddhist Tantras	207
G. Self-Purification in Hindu Tantras	216
H. Conclusion	221

Chapter One: Introduction

Agnimile purohitam yajñasya devam rutvijam

Let us honor the fire, the fire priest, [and] the deity, who is the minister of sacrifice
RV 1-001-01

*Âthrô ahurahe mazda puthrahe tava âtarsh puthra ahurahe mazda
Xshnaothra yasnâica vahmâica xshnaothrâica frasastayaêca*

“To Fire, the son of Ahura Mazda. To you, O Fire, son of Ahura Mazda.
With propitiation, for worship, adoration, propitiation, and praise”
Yasna 0.2

It is significant that the first verses of the *R̥g Veda* and *Avesta*, two of the most ancient religious texts, honor fire (Agni or Ātar) and sacrifice (*yajña* or *yasna*). Fire sacrifice represents perhaps the oldest and most widespread of Asian practices. In various forms and religious contexts, it continues to provide meaning to millions of Asians worldwide. *Homa*, an apotropaic sacrifice that consists of burning various substances in a ritual fire, has had a particularly long and diverse history across a wide range of Asian countries and religious traditions.

Shortly before his untimely death in 1994, Sinologist Michel Strickmann turned his attention to the study of *homa* fire sacrifices, specifically in the East Asian context. Strickmann questioned why, given the surplus of material and opportunities for direct observation, western scholars have neglected a comparative study of *homa*

for so long. He makes the case that the basic structural homogeneity of *homa* transcends sectarian, geographical, and cultural boundaries and, thus, it clearly calls for a comparative study in its own right.¹ The present study initiates that project by investigating *homa* in a manner not limited by the sectarian and geographic boundaries that often characterize Religious Studies scholarship.

Maps and Boundaries: A Justification of the Study

Three generally held assumptions regarding fire ritual in South Asia will be challenged in this project: 1) traditional religious and geographical categories represent an appropriate model for understanding ritual practice; 2) ritual sacrifice in South Asia historically has been subordinated to or replaced by devotional practices; and, 3) Vedic sacrifice represents the oldest and most comprehensive source material for the study of South Asian ritual.

First, while it may be accepted that national borders are modern constructions, hegemonic ways of imagining political divisions still characterize, to a large degree, the discipline of Religious Studies. Most scholars specialize in a particular geographic region, such as South Asia, China, or Japan, and feel uncomfortable working outside the artificial boundaries that encompass the region. Although place certainly represents an important element of religion and geo-specific studies have produced an immense amount of valuable data, mapping

¹ Strickmann (1983), pg. 419.

religious phenomena based solely upon modern geographic units can be misleading and limiting.²

In his study of China, Victor Mair criticizes this scholarly tendency to rely upon reified geographic categories and, thus, to disregard evidence of cross-cultural interaction. He argues “despite the plethora of detailed data indicating contact and exchange among early peoples, there is a strong intellectual bias in favor of the proposition that ancient civilizations arose essentially in perfect isolation.”³ For the source of this bias, he points to the post World War II nationalistic consciousness as well as the academic preference for specialization where it is “thought almost perverse to stray far beyond the narrow spatial, temporal, and disciplinary boundaries established for one’s doctoral dissertation.”⁴ He terms this tendency “blinded scholarship” and argues that specialists of any geographic area, whether it be ancient Greece, second century China, or medieval Iran, should seek to understand “the dynamics of cultural development” and “engage in serious, in-depth investigations of cultural phenomena that transcend modern national frontiers.”⁵

Sectarian categories such as Buddhist, Hindu, or Zoroastrian similarly tend to give the impression that religious phenomena can be understood in isolation. The division of the world into great traditions is often found to be not grounded in empirical data, but rather based on maps constructed by scholars and/or religious

² Lewis and Wigen (1997) further argue that comparative studies too often rely upon problematic metageographic categories, such as ‘Iran vs. India’, ‘East vs. West,’ and ‘Central vs. South Asia,’ as if these constructs are somehow naturally rather than socially constructed.

³ Mair, 2006, pg. 3.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 4.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 5.

elites. These maps should always be used cautiously. Although certain practices, beliefs, groups, and texts *are* distinguishable as Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Vedic, Tantric, etc., the problem arises when these categories are used as if they were representations of reality instead of the socially constructed units that they are.

The study of religions through the lens of traditional categories has resulted in the isolation of texts into neatly organized scriptural canons. Thus, Zoroastrian scholars analyze Avestan and Pahlavi texts while Hindu scholars investigate the *Vedas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, Hindu *Tantras*, and so on. While there certainly exists a wealth of internal data within these texts to support such classification (after all various *śākhās* were quite careful to point out their distinctiveness), once a text becomes categorized as “Buddhist” there seems to be an unspoken consensus that it must become the sole purview of Buddhist scholars and, hence, often read through the lens of an already constructed Buddhism.⁶

Since many texts self identify as such, the above methods are not entirely misguided. However, the approach is limited at best and threatens to silence other historical interpretations. For example, how does the Buddhist scholar make sense of the *Kharoṣṭhī* scrolls uncovered in Gandhāra which, according to Salomon, contradict many of the assumptions taken for granted by Buddhologists?⁷ Similarly, what is the Zoroastrian or Hindu scholar to make of the 1932 translation by Chatterjee of a text entitled *The Hymns of Atharvan Zarathushtra; Being the Bhrigu portion of the Atharva Veda, otherwise called Upastha (Avesta)*? Considering that

⁶ On this point, see Lopez (1995).

⁷ Salomon (1999).

very little has been written to explain these anomalous texts, the response to such challenges has largely been, in J.Z. Smith's words, to "think away the incongruities."⁸ Religious texts, including ritual manuals, should be studied from a standpoint that recognizes the realities of contact and exchange with other groups. Thus, when analyzing any given ritual practice in Asia, we should consider the broader literary genres and religious fashions of the time and place where the practice received authority.

The present comparison of *homa* sacrifices investigates shared ritual technologies and, thus, mines the religious texts belonging to Buddhist, Hindu, and Zoroastrian traditions. Even when considering the broader genre, though, using textual data alone can be problematic at best. Hence, this project is also driven by triangulation—a strategy that synthesizes data from multiple research methods in order to construct as complete a picture as possible. In my reconstruction of *homa* fire sacrifices across Asia, I utilize not only primary texts from multiple religious traditions, but also observable data drawn from archaeology, anthropology, art history, field research, ritual studies, history, and first hand accounts. Such triangulation reduces the possibility of researcher bias or, as Mair words it, "blinded scholarship."

In short, this project seeks to highlight the dynamics of cultural contact and exchange that characterize the development of fire sacrifice across Asian regions at various points in history. By taking shared Asian ritual practice (specifically *homa*

⁸ Smith (1993), pg. 297.

fire sacrifices) rather than a specific geographic region or religious tradition, as a starting point, we find elements and meanings that are widely shared by Asian practitioners. However, by comparing the unique variations of shared ritual technologies, we also find out what is theologically distinct.

The second assumption this project challenges is the argument made by Kane and others that ritual practice (*deva yajña*) in South Asia historically was replaced by devotional worship (*deva pūjā*).⁹ There is no question that devotional practices increasingly appeared across South Asia over time, especially during the medieval period. This fact, however, is not sufficient proof to declare that fire sacrifices and other forms of religious practice declined or become subordinated to *bhakti* worship. A plethora of data (including ritual manuals, ethnographic accounts, medical texts, art, and archaeology) suggests that exoteric fire rites, including those classified as *yajña*, continue to be widely practiced across South Asia. For example, Gonda correctly points out that *homa* sacrifices have “curiously enough, been retained in nearly all extended Puja ceremonies.”¹⁰ Fire sacrifice has not died out in South Asia nor has it been replaced by devotional worship. Rather, it continues to thrive in multiple ritual contexts.

A related assumption made by some South Asian scholars is that exoteric fire ritual in India underwent an eventual process of interiorization. Heesterman, for example, argues that this is one feature that distinguished the development of fire ritual in Vedic and Iranian contexts. He writes, “While the Iranian cult made the fire,

⁹ Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. II, 696-704.

¹⁰ Gonda, (1970), pg. 79-80.

immobilized in its temple, transcendental, its Vedic counterpart interiorized the sacrificial flame in one's inner Self, the *ātman*.”¹¹ There is no question that interior fire rituals are described at length in multiple texts from many traditions. However, not only are there examples of interiorized fire in Iranian ritual,¹² the development of ‘interiorized sacrifice’ does not necessitate the decline of exoteric rites. As Bantor states, “The external fire offering (in which various oblations are poured into an actual fire) did not lose its popularity in India with the decline of vedic ritual (*yajna*) and the evolution of the *puja*”¹³

What these historical reconstructions—subordination of and/or interiorization of *yajña* and so forth—have in common is that they unconsciously accept and impose a linear frame of reference onto the data. There persists a strong desire to interpret the material as somehow understandable in terms of historical succession. However, religion in South Asia is much too complex to analyze within a single historical narrative. Practices die out, evolve, migrate, transform, and spring up, but rarely in a manner that can be understood without engaging the dynamics of cultural contact and exchange. Also, the creation of new ritual technologies does not suggest that the old technologies become obsolete. Often, they function alongside and as an integral part of new innovations. Thus, the question we should be asking is not whether sacrificial models have become subordinated, interiorized, or obsolete but,

¹¹ Heesterman (1993), pg. 6.

¹² Cf. Panaino (2004).

¹³ Bantor (2000), pg. 77.

rather, how elements of fire sacrifice persist as a meaningful ritual technology alongside (and in many ways independent of) Asian devotional practices.

Finally, the present project challenges the generally held assumption, most clearly articulated by Frits Staal, that Vedic ritual represents “the oldest surviving ritual of mankind” and, thus, “provides the best source material for a theory of ritual.”¹⁴ Indeed, Vedic ritual is, by far, the most analyzed ritual complex in Asian studies. However, too often Vedic sacrifice is equated with the rituals detailed in the *Śrautasūtras*, thus generating the false impression that ‘Vedic’ represents a definable and congruous category. Additionally, there is no evidence that *śrauta* rites, rarely practiced today and limited to ‘Hindu’ traditions, ever spread outside the borders of India.

As an alternate starting point, I propose that the ritual field surrounding *homa* rites offers far more comprehensive source material from which to construct a theory of ritual. Not only are the central elements of *homa* sequences significantly more ancient than the elaborate *śrauta* rites, they are also far more widespread than the elaborate Vedic rites ever were. *Homa* takes various forms in the many places where it is practiced, including India, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, and China, but its basic structure and efficacy seem to remain relatively constant. Moreover, *homa* sacrifices continue to be practiced across Asia today by multiple sects and religious groups. In other words, *homa* fire sacrifices comprise an essential element of lay religiosity and, thus, are much more mainstream than *śrauta* rites ever were. While allegedly Vedic

¹⁴ Staal (1979), pg. 2.

in origin, *homa* encompasses a much wider field of practice and, thus, represents a very rich, and largely underexploited, field of study.

Ritual Without Religion: Shared Asian Ritual Technologies

Three approaches in particular have helped shape the methodology of the current project. First, the work of Richard Cohen provides a practical tool to balance the tension between generalization and specialization. Cohen offers an example of an alternate interpretive scheme when he analyzes Buddhist *nāga* worship in early medieval India, arguing for both local and trans-local religious trends.¹⁵ With ritual, much like mythology, philosophy, and any other field of knowledge constitutive of “culture,” we find both local distinctiveness as well as trans-local elements that bridge regions, religions, and cultures. By considering the local (or “particular”) in relation to the trans-local (or “universal”), Cohen avoids both reductionism and overspecialization. Likewise, this project plays with the tension between what is shared and what is unique; here fire sacrifice will serve as my organizing principle.

Second, Richard Davis’s concept of ritual universe offers a valuable organizing principle for thinking about the importance of ritual practice. In his in-depth study of a South Indian *Saiddhāntika* ritual system, Davis excavates a “matrix of propositions that constitute the world within which Śaivas conceptualize and

¹⁵ Cohen (1998).

practice ritual.”¹⁶ Within the Śaiva ritual universe, Davis insists there exists a “metaphysical unity” of knowledge (*jñāna*) and ritual practice (*kriyā*). In other words, ritual practice and intellectual understanding (situated within a particular worldview) cannot be divorced from one another. His approach to the *Saiddhāntika* ritual universe serves as a model for interpreting the meaning of ritual within distinctive theological worldviews—a model I draw upon in the final chapter to compare the interplay of fire and water in three ritual universes.

Finally, Frits Staal’s writing on ritual has been a major influence on the present work. Staal questioned the methodologies that have characterized most studies on ritual. Instead of looking for the theological or mythological meaning of ritual, he shifts his analysis to the syntactic rules that govern rites. Ritual, he argues, represents pure, rule-governed activity that precedes religion and even language itself. Thus, the syntactic rules of ritual should be studied independently of the semantic constructions that characterize “religion.” I agree with Staal that ritual represents a more fundamental field of study than religious beliefs, especially in the Asian context. Even in the modern period, it is clear that what one *does* in Asia is far more important than what one *believes*. In China, for example, it is quite common to hear the people claim that “there is no religion in China” despite the fact that multiple rituals are practiced daily in thousands of temples across the country.

Staal’s works challenge the tendency to construct Asian religions by focusing on texts, belief systems, and doctrine. Asian ritual practices exist independent of all

¹⁶ Davis (1991), pg. 22.

those categories. In Asia, there exist many examples of what he refers to as “ritual without religion” including *homa* sacrifices, ceremonial baths (skt. *snāna*), consecration rituals (*abhiṣeka*), and initiation rites (*dīkṣa*). Instead of beginning with text-based beliefs and doctrines from the great religions, scholars of Asian religions should consider seriously the independent importance afforded to practices—practices that often transcend traditional geographic and religious boundaries. On this point, Grapard advises that “we should change the academically accepted practice of divorcing Indology from Buddhology, or Shintology from Buddhology, or for that matter, I might add, ideas from institutions.”¹⁷

This study draws upon the above works in the hope of offering a method of research that is not limited by modern religious or geographical categories—two of the “great fetishes.”¹⁸ I definitely am *not* arguing that traditional geographic and religious categories, which have been in use for so long, can be thought away. The current study itself cannot dispose of problematic labels such as Vedic, Tantric, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Persian, etc. On the contrary, what I attempt to do here is to think of these categories from a different angle; using the incongruities and overlaps “to provide an occasion for thought.”¹⁹ In short, by comparing forms of fire ritual, specifically *homa*, in various Asian traditions, I hope to highlight interlocking patterns between regions, time periods and religions. These interlocking points

¹⁷ Grapard (1991), pg. 212.

¹⁸ I refer here to Lefebvre’s argument regarding the tendency to fetishize abstract categories. Lefebvre argues that it is an error to “think of things [such as geographical categories] in themselves” (1991, pg. 90).

¹⁹ Smith (1993), pg. 390.

reveal that fire sacrifice has always constituted a major element of mainstream practice in Asian traditions.

Chapter Overview

Although the following individual chapters comprise independent arguments, they all pertain to the ritual field surrounding *homa* fire sacrifices. Each chapter utilizes the topic of fire sacrifice to elucidate a series of historical and theoretical propositions.

First, Chapter Two argues that the ritual field surrounding *homa* rites can serve as a comprehensive source material for the study of Asian ritual. *Homa* extends across multiple traditions and geographic regions. This chapter surveys *homa* rites as they are found in Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, Iranian, Vedic, and Tantric sources. Contrary to being subordinated to devotion during the medieval period, the pervasiveness of *homa* demonstrates that exoteric sacrifices continue to be practiced in thousands of temples and religious contexts worldwide.

Chapter Three challenges the assertion, made by many scholars, that *tantric homa* rites are Vedic in origin. Drawing upon a wide range of data, this chapter argues that many of the central elements associated with *homa* rites can be found also in Iranian fire sacrifices. The ritual structure, implements used, and substances offered more closely resemble Zoroastrian ritual technologies than their Vedic

counterparts. Moreover, *tantric* texts and Sanskrit nomenclature pertaining to *homa* can be traced primarily to Central Asian regions, particularly Gandhāra and Kashmir. Thus, the rites cannot be considered to be exclusively Indian or Vedic in origin.

Chapter Four considers those elements of *tantric homa* rites that can be traced Vedic sources and argues that the ritual technologies of the Atharva Veda most closely resemble later *tantric* ritual structures. Thus, this chapter challenges the idea that there existed a single, homogenous ritual system in Vedic India. In Brahmanical literature, the Atharva Veda has, more often than not, been categorized as separate from the traditional *traividyā* texts, leading Modak to characterize it as the Veda of the masses.²⁰ Moreover, there exists considerable conceptual and terminological overlap, especially with regard to fire sacrifice, between the Zoroastrian Avesta and the Atharva Veda. Thus, certain elements of *tantric homa* found in both the Avesta and the Atharva Veda likely developed out of a common Indo-Iranian substratum.

Chapter Five moves to the topic of ritual efficacy. Specifically, it compares the demonifugic role attributed to *tantric homa* rites and Zoroastrian *yasna* rites. There exist parallels between early Vedic and Avestan sources regarding sacrifice as a means to combat human enemies, such as black magicians, witches, or enemies of righteousness. During the medieval period, there is a shift from understanding ritual as a means to combat external enemies to an understanding of ritual as a means to overcome personal obstructions. Medieval Zoroastrian and Tantric sources similarly

²⁰ Modak (1993).

describe sacrifice as a tool to combat internal enemies that take the form of personal faults or obstructions. Drawing on these data, this chapter proposes that contact and exchange between Iranian and Indian traditions did not cease after the Vedic period. Rather, contact and exchange between Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists continued throughout the medieval period. The demonological systems and conceptual understanding of sacrifice as a means to combat demons among these three traditions disclose significant resemblances, thus suggesting that Iranian ritual paradigms continued to have an impressive impact on developing *tantric* schools.

Finally, Chapter Six compares the meaning of sacrifice in three ritual universes, thus challenging the claim made by Staal that ritual is best understood as “Rules Without Meaning.”²¹ Although I applaud Staal’s attempt to study ritual independently of established religion, I disagree with his conclusion that ritual represents meaningless activity. Contrary to Staal’s claim that it does not matter what one thinks or says during ritual practice, this chapter argues that the mind and mental thoughts comprise an essential element of sacrifice. This suggests that meaning (semantics) and sacrifice (syntax) cannot easily be divorced from each other. Although the syntactic rules concerning fire and water remain surprisingly constant across multiple traditions, they have come to be understood in theologically specific ways. The meanings attributed to the ritual use of fire and water serve as a fertile ground for comparative work that moves beyond strictly mythological or textual data.

²¹ Staal (1990).

The risk of comparative projects such as this one, which cover such a wide range of regions, time periods, and religious traditions, is that the nuances and depth of individual movements is lost. For example, in Chapter Six I set out to distinguish varying ritual paradigms regarding the use of fire and water. However, since I focus strictly on the interplay between fire and water in particular rites, the treatment of distinct ritual paradigms remains, necessarily, rather terse. Each ritual universe certainly expands far beyond my treatment of it here. I have, therefore, included references for readers wishing to consult specialized studies from particular traditions.

Though the topic of this project is fire ritual, it is my expectation that it will appeal to a wide range of scholars. First, it addresses methodological issues that have interested, and at times plagued, historians of religions. By investigating how shared ritual practices come to be understood in theologically specific ways, it offers a comparative methodology that is fruitful without relying on the problematic colonial categories that tend to treat data in isolation.

Next, this project is aimed at South Asian scholars in that it seeks to challenge essentialist categories, such as “Tibetan Buddhism” or “Vedic sacrifice,” and argues that religious traditions develop not as isolated phenomena but, rather, as a result of continual contact and exchange among human actors from a variety of geographic regions. The historical study of *homa* yields important insights regarding how ‘religion’ evolves—which is never in isolation but through a complex matrix of contact and exchange among groups of people.

Finally, the present work will contribute to the relatively young sub-discipline of Ritual Studies. As Ronald Grimes so well points out, scholars still struggle with how to approach the study of ritual. Theorists such as Catherine Bell have offered valuable tools for organizing the study of ritual. Yet classification is but a small step toward making sense of particular ritual practices. The concept of shared rituals serves as a meaningful tool for comparing how humans interact with the divine and demonic on a physical plane. The sheer range of fire sacrifices (*homa* particularly) deem it a worthy topic of investigation, as pointed out by Michel Strickmann over a decade ago.

Chapter Two: *Homa: An Exemplary Asian Fire Sacrifice*

W.D. Whitney once claimed, “All dates given in Indian literary history are pins set up to be bowled down again.”¹ The same could be said for ritual theories built around ancient forms of sacrifice; though perhaps the metaphor would more aptly be described as setting up multiple sets of pins rather than necessarily knocking anything down. There exists no singular set of elements that comprise something we can identify as Asian ritual or, for that matter, Vedic sacrifice, Zoroastrian fire worship, or *tantric* ritual. We can, however, identify certain clusters of ritual elements, much like a set of bowling pins, that often are not limited by religious affiliation.

Ritual Studies, a relatively young sub-field, in many ways has offered an alternative methodology for studying religious traditions; one that takes practice rather than belief as a starting point. Most theories of ritual either focus on broad ritual categories that span a wide range of religions, such as Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, or on a specific ritual idiom within a religious tradition, such as the many works on Vedic sacrifice. This project seeks a balance between the two approaches by focusing on a rite shared across a wide range of religious traditions and geographic regions—*homa* fire sacrifices.

¹ Whitney (1924), pg. xix.

Homa rites, which consist of offering various substances into a ritual fire, exemplify one of the most ancient and pervasive ritual technologies in Asia. The persistence of exoteric *homa* sacrifices demonstrates that fire sacrifice, far from being subordinated to devotional worship during the medieval period,² continues to be a cornerstone of Asian practice. Diverse practitioners belonging to Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Shintō, Zoroastrian, and other groups practice contemporary *homa* sacrifices across Asia. While the range and diversity of *homa* sacrifices defies scholarly classification, this chapter will set out to provide an overview of *homa* sacrifices in various regions across Asia with a particular emphasis on *homa* as it has developed in South Asia. By tracing the textual references to *homa* in various contexts, this chapter will also lay the groundwork for the argument that *homa* cannot accurately be considered as Vedic in origin.

Fire rituals have been practiced across Asia since the beginning of human history. Thus, there are many ritual terms and classifications from the Sanskrit that parallel or overlap with *homa* rites. For example, *havana*, *hutim bali*, and *āhuta* meaning ‘oblation’ or ‘offering’ are often treated as synonymous with *homa*.³ The

² An oft-invoked theory most famously proposed by Kane (1968), pg. 696-704.

³ It is beyond the scope of this project to determine when these conflationations have been appropriately, or erroneously, applied. The point is that, at times, other ritual terminology was employed to refer to *homa* fire sacrifices. For example, in Chand’s translation of the Atharva Veda, he translates *havir* (which combats disease) as both *homa* and *havana* (1980, pg. 317); in the *jñāna-sankalīna-tantra*, the author similarly translates *homa* with the comparable term *havana* (Kulabhooshan, 1975, pg. 21) and in the BaudhŚS, *homa*, *huti*, *āhuta*, and *karaṇa* are used interchangeably, all translated as ‘offering’ (see, for example, Kashikar, 2003, pgs. 1347, 1350, 1369). Also, *homa* has been used to designate other ritual terms associated with fire sacrifice and/or architecture. In the *Mayamatam* (an architecture treatise composed sometime between the 9th and 12th centuries), the term *homa* actually means platform (see Dagens, 1994, pg. 159, 181) or a type of wood (pg. 497), and *bali* is employed to designate oblations offered into fire-pits of various shapes (pgs. xli, 52, 181, 295, 297, etc.). This

present chapter will focus primarily on the history and development of distinctive liturgies named *homa* (*goma* in Japanese). Although particularized in unique ritual contexts, *homa* sacrifices rely upon common ritual structures and underlying beliefs regarding the efficacy and use of ritual fire.

Homa in Japan

In Nittaiji, a small non-sectarian temple in Nagoya, Japan, a young priest prepares for one of four daily *homa* performances. A small number of witnesses gather for the performance but the majority of traffic through the temple seemingly does not notice that the fire ritual is taking place. The noises that fill the temple are the talk of the visitors and the continual ringing of a bell that signifies a donation has just been deposited at the entrance of the temple. Meanwhile, the young priest quietly mutters *mantras* read from a ritual manual while performing various actions such as stacking small wooden sticks, feeding fuel to the fire, and sprinkling water around the fire and over the ritual implements. The performance ends as it began, with the priest quietly, and without fanfare, exiting the ritual arena.

At another *homa* performance in the *Inuyama Narita*, a Shingon temple across the city, several priests clad in elaborate purple robes file into the temple, chanting loudly and in beautiful harmony. The head priest makes a pronounced entrance and receives the undivided attention of all those who have gathered in the

differs significantly from the usual usage of *bali* as offerings that are *not* offered into a fire and it seems as if *bali* in this context is used instead of *homa*. Again, this study does not allow for an in depth study of variances in terminology across religious texts.

temple for the service. Chanting, *mantra* recitation, and loud bell ringing frame the entire liturgy. The witnesses of the ritual also play an important role. At one point of the rite, all those who have offered donations for the rite have their names incorporated into the chants being recited aloud. Soon after, a ritual assistant gathers purses, briefcases, or any other personal objects from the crowd to hold in front of the fire, which blazes high from the various fuels and substances inserted by the priest. The fire, having been empowered by the chief priest and *mantra* recitation, serves as a source of prosperity providing energy. It is believed that the objects presented absorb this energy when placed within physical proximity of the ritual fire.

The above performances represent very different ritual scenarios. The first performance seems to be an example of ritual being performed for ritual's sake. The young priest, when interviewed, offered no explanation for the 'meaning' of the rites; only that this is how he had been taught by his father, who followed the tradition taught to him, as recorded in the ancient ritual manuals allegedly brought from India. The second rite is, undoubtedly, much more entertaining and, for lack of a better description, better business. Pamphlets explain to the visitors that the rites bring prosperity and success in business. The inclusion of the visitors gives the sense that personal advantage can come from attending (and sponsoring) the rites.

However, despite the differences in tone, the above performances share many important qualities. Not only do they both exemplify the lasting power of *homa* fire sacrifices, they also share many key elements such as the ritual burning of substances, sprinkling of water, recitation of *mantras* (some of which are inscribed

on planks of wood in the *siddham* script), and the belief that the rites are obligatory as well as conducive to success.

Homa rites in Japan serve as a good starting point, as they are not only readily observable, but also because there exists a significant amount of scholarship upon which to draw. Richard Payne has written about the widespread popularity of the rites in Japanese Buddhism and points out that *homa* also has been appropriated by non-Buddhist practitioners such as Shugendō mountain ascetics as well as by some Shintō traditions.⁴ Bodiford adds that *tantric* elements, including rituals and deities, have had a pervasive influence on virtually all Japanese religious traditions and explains that even today *homa* rites “are ubiquitous not just in Shingon and Tendai, but also in Hossō, Nichiren, and Zen lineages, as well as in Shintō . . . mountain asceticism (*shugendō*), and many New Age religions, such as Agonshū.”⁵ Both agree that, although incorporated into various religious groups, *homa* first came to Japan as part of the *tantric* Buddhist tradition.

In contemporary Buddhist temples, Japanese monks of the Shingon, Tendai, and “non-sectarian”⁶ branches perform *homa* (*goma*) sacrifices regularly, often four times per day. While western scholarship has long tended to reify sectarian differences, variations amongst Japanese Buddhist groups seem to be neither profound nor distinctive. The lay community members often attend ritual

⁴ Payne adds, “despite a rhetoric of purifying Shintō of Buddhist influences” (2000), pg. 492.

⁵ Bodiford (2000), pg. 299.

⁶ In the Nittaiji temple pamphlets, for example, the temple is characterized as ‘non-sectarian.’ Presumably, this means it is not Tendai or Shingon since it clearly still is Buddhist.

performances for practical purposes rather than based on some religious or sectarian affiliation.⁷

Accordingly, more parallels than divergences can be found regarding the structure and efficacy of *homa* as detailed in Shingon and Tendai ritual manuals. Payne, in his introduction to a “Ritual Manual for the Protective Fire Offering to Mañjuśrī” details five sets of offerings, each following the same basic pattern, made within a *homa* sacrifice—including to Agni, to the bodhisattvas surrounding Mañjuśrī, and to “Vedic deities and astral groupings.”⁸ Saso offers a similar account of a *homa* in Tendai Buddhism, comprised of six sets of offerings, also beginning with Agni and ending with the “spirits of Vedic religion” such as fire, water, earth, wind, space, sun, moon, and stars.⁹

In Japan, *homa* rites are generally classified into three basic types: *śāntika* (for appeasement), *pauṣṭika* (for prosperity), and *abhicāraka* (for harming enemies).¹⁰ *Śāntika homa* represents the version most commonly performed in contemporary Japan. All variations of *homa*, however, are understood to avert evil influences; whether it is obstacles to prosperity or obstructions to health. Strickmann summarizes the apotropaic function of *homa* sacrifices well when he writes that they

⁷ For an in depth and interesting discussion on this point, see Reader and Tanabe (1998) and Sawada (2004). Related to this, Stephen Covell (2005) discusses some pan-sectarian features of temple Buddhism in Japan.

⁸ Payne (2000), pg. 490.

⁹ Saso (1991), pg. 34.

¹⁰ Richard Payne points out, however, that in certain texts, *homa* often is classified into four or even five categories. “The East Asian Tantric Buddhist tradition knows five kinds of homas, identified according to the purpose for which they are performed: protection (*śāntika*), increase (*pauṣṭika*), subjugation (*abhicāraka*), subordination (*vaśīkaraṇa*), and acquisition (*aṅkuśa*)” (2000, pg. 489). Parallel classifications are found also in Chinese and Tibetan Mahāyāna texts.

are performed in order to fight ills, which “are without number, comprising in the external world flood, fire, insects, hail, locusts and . . . [within the body comprising] myriad forms of disease and distress.”¹¹

Without question, therefore, *homa* rites comprise a central component of Japanese religious culture.¹² Scholars agree that *homa* rites entered Japan via the *tantric* Buddhist schools brought to the country from China by Saicho and Kukai between the seventh and eighth centuries.¹³ In Shingon schools, the central texts brought from China by Kukai include the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (MVS) and the *Vajrasekhara Sūtra* (also known as *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*), neither of which have an extant Sanskrit original (only some *mantras* have been preserved in *siddham* script). For the Tendai schools, Michael Saso explains that *mikkyō* tantric rites are orally transmitted (*kuden*) but that the four main rites, including the *Goma* fire rite, are prescribed in texts translated from Chinese, which purportedly were first translated from Sanskrit root texts.¹⁴ Therefore, the sources of *homa* prescriptions in Japanese practice are relatively delimited, originating solely in Mahāyāna texts imported from China.

¹¹ Strickmann (1983), pg. 434.

¹² For more regarding Shintō appropriation of *homa*, see Kitagawa (1988), and Hardacre (1988). Both agree that incorporation and systemization of rituals such as *homa* served to unite Shintō priesthood, which consisted of a broad and diverse range of doctrine and ethics.

¹³ The transmission of Tantric *homa* via China will be further engaged in Chapter Three.

¹⁴ Saso (1987), pg. 235. The other three rites are *Jūhachi-dō*, *Taizō-kai*, and *Kongō-kai*.

Homa in Chinese Sources

Chinese texts represent one of the most understudied sources of Mahāyāna Buddhism since only a very small percentage of the extant texts have been translated or evaluated.¹⁵ From what has been studied, however, it is clear that *homa* sacrifices comprised a central element of Chinese ritual from a very early period. Chinese Buddhist *tantras* consistently prescribe *homa* as a means for purifying or removing evil influences.

According to Michel Strickmann the basic Chinese descriptions of *homa* rites have been in print since at least the first printing of a Chinese Buddhist Canon (971-983).¹⁶ He goes on to argue, however, that the practice of *homa* significantly predates the Chinese Buddhist Canon. The apotropaic function attributed to the burning of mustard seeds, a central component of *tantric homa* rites, is referenced as early as 317-420 CE, in the *Matangi Sutra* and the *Mantra Sutra Taught by the Seven Buddhas of the Past*. This text prescribes that, as a result of burning of mustard seeds, “all evil demons will straight-away be entirely burned up.”¹⁷

Strickmann argues that the first occurrence of the word *homa* to designate a particular Buddhist liturgy can be found in two Chinese texts translated by Bodhiruci (ca. 509). These texts already distinguish between the three basic types of *homa* with varying prescriptions for each: *śāntika* for pacification, *paustika* for prosperity, and *abhicāraka* for the subjugation of demons or human adversaries assimilated to

¹⁵ For a good overview of Chinese Mahāyāna texts, and the need for further study, see Hodge's introduction to the *Mahāvairocana-abhisambodhi Tantra* (2003).

¹⁶ Strickmann (1983), pg. 421.

¹⁷ Strickmann (1983), pg. 425.

demons. *Homa* as a particularized rite can also be found in several translations attributed to the Sui dynasty (sixth century). Though these texts do not offer a formal classification of *homa*, there are “different versions presented as bringing relief from disease, deliverance from demons, robbers, etc . . . The medium, once again is the apotropaic white mustard seed.”¹⁸ The Collected *Dhāraṇīsūtras* (circa 650 CE) further contain a rather detailed prescription for *homa* that closely resembles the contemporary rites as practiced in Japan. In short, though central elements of *homa* rites date to at least the fourth century in China, we can firmly state that the basic classification and rules for *homa* were well established in texts dated to the sixth and seventh centuries.

Later texts demonstrate the continued importance afforded to *homa* in Chinese Mahāyāna texts. The *Mahā-Vairocana-Uttara-Tantra*, translated into Chinese in 724, begins with chapters on four specific forms of *homa*: for pacifying, enriching, subduing and ‘the ritual for the *homa* of the fierce actions.’¹⁹ The *Susiddhikāra sūtra*, another text translated into Chinese in the eighth century,²⁰ categorizes *homa* into the three basic categories, *śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, *abhicāraka*, with prescriptions specific to each.²¹ The substances cast into the fire vary from ghee, sesame, and mustard (in *śāntika* and *pauṣṭika*) to more transgressive substances such as blood, poison, and even human feces (in *abhicāraka*).

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 433.

¹⁹ Hodge (2003), pg. 393-409.

²⁰ Neither of these texts have an extant Sanskrit original.

²¹ In *śāntika* and *pauṣṭika*, the practitioner should wear white garments and in the *abhicāraka homa*, red robes are to be worn. The fire hearths should be round, square, and triangular respectively (Giebel, 2001).

The classification of *homa* in Chinese textual sources, however, quickly becomes far more complex. The texts enumerate multiple forms of *homa* fires that do not clearly fit the three, four, or five fold classificatory system; each with specific properties that must be known in order for the rite to be successful.²² Therefore, besides being categorized into the typical types, *homa* extends across, and is incorporated into, a wide variety of practices and ceremonies.

For example, teachers prescribe a *homa* ceremony to accompany the consecration of disciples. The *Mahāvairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra* prescribes that the *abhiṣeka* ceremony includes a general *homa* sacrifice in the middle of the rite and a *śāntika homa* at the conclusion. When it is not possible to dig a fire pit (*kuṇḍa*), a painted hearth, called a ‘simplified *homa* site’ is sufficient. Then, the *homa* site is sprinkled with perfumed water and, with left hand, the *ācārya* “holds the disciples by the thumb of their right hand and offers up *homa* in brief.”²³ *Homa* as part of the initiation is understood to free the disciples from all faults. The teacher (*ācārya*), with a mind of compassion, “performs the *homa* of pacification, and when doing *homa* he abides by the rules.”²⁴ In this rite, then, the *homa* performed in the midst of the initiation is distinguished from the final *śāntika homa* and, apparently, from the other traditional forms.

²² Fires enumerated in the MVT are categorized into groups of twelve and, elsewhere, forty-four.

²³ Giebel (2003), pg. 55.

²⁴ Ibid.

The *Mahāvairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra* contains an entire chapter covering *homa* rituals generally (outside the traditional categories)²⁵ and discusses both internal and external forms as follows:

There are two kinds of *homa*, namely, internal and external: One obtains liberation from karma and [re] birth, and there is also the arising of sprouts and seeds [of awakening]. Because it is able to burn away karma, it is called ‘internal *homa*’. For external use there are three positions (i.e. practitioner, hearth, and deity), and these three positions dwell within [each of] the three.²⁶

Other Chinese ritual texts intricately connect the practice of *homa* rites with astrology. Orzech and Sanford discuss the performance of *homa* in relation to astral worship in the eighth and ninth centuries. They write, “Aimed squarely at neutralizing the evil effects of astral divinities and at promoting good fortune and long life, these [three Chinese] texts were an integral part of the new Tantric teachings tailored to the concerns of Chinese aristocrats and military men.”²⁷ The Tang masters, as part of the program to produce accurate calendars, “performed *homa* (immolation) rituals designed to propitiate the ‘nine Graspers’ (spirits of the planets, which are often associated with disease: *jiu zhi* in Chinese; *navagraha* in Sanskrit) and designed new rites to address the lords of the Great Dipper (an asterism in Ursa Major).”²⁸ Therefore, individual *homa* liturgies are developed to propitiate astrological beings, such as the *jiu zhi* (nine graspers) or the Seven Luminaries of the Ursa Major.

²⁵ See, for example, Hodge (2003), pg. 389.

²⁶ Giebel (2003), pg. 152.

²⁷ Orzech and Sanford (2000), pg. 387.

²⁸ Ibid, pg. 386.

Doubtless, much more material pertaining to *homa* exists in Chinese texts, although it seems to have disappeared in contemporary practice, at least in the urban context.²⁹ From what we do know, however, *homa* fire sacrifices comprised an important and essential element of Chinese ritual practice starting at least the fourth century and being systemized by the sixth. The basic divisions, purposes and descriptions of *homa* closely parallel those that start to appear in Tibetan texts around the eighth century.

Homa in Tibetan Buddhism

Fire sacrifices that parallel or involve *homa* have a long history in Central Asia and are practiced by Tibetan Buddhist and Zoroastrians as well as being assimilated into local customs, such as in Kathmandu Valley,³⁰ and parts of Iran, as well as by pagan groups.³¹ The main distinguishing features of Tibetan *homa* rites can be found in the particular *mantras* recited, *mūdras* employed, deities invoked, and *maṇḍala(s)* constructed.

Skorupski, who has written an introductory overview of Tibetan *homa* rites, explains that prescriptions for contemporary *homa* rites are based primarily upon two versions of the *Sarvadurgatipariṣodhana* (the first version translated into Tibetan in

²⁹ Not only have I been unable to locate accounts of Chinese *homa* in current scholarship, on a recent trip to China, I was unable to find a single Chinese scholar (at Shanghai University) or practicing monk (at a number of temples in Shanghai) who had ever even heard of *homa*.

³⁰ See, for example, Snellgrove (1957).

³¹ According to Christian Ratch, some traces of a 'Homa Cult' can still be found in Iran today (Nabarz, 2005, pg. 42-43). Also, *homa* has come to be incorporated into modern pagan rituals. A procedure for performing *homa*, for example, is given for the benefit of modern pagans in the 'Cardiff University Pagan Society' magazine.

the eighth century and the second version in the thirteenth century).³² Similar to the categorization of *homa* in Chinese sources, the *Sarvadurgatipariṣodhana Tantra* (ST) refers to four types: *śānti*, *puṣṭi*, *vaśya* and *abhicāra*. The shape of the fire hearth, the color of garments worn, and the substances offered vary according to the rite performed. In the *śānti homa*, the practitioner wears a white garment and constructs a circular hearth; in the rite for subjugation (*vaśya homa*), red garments are worn and red sandalwood, red flowers, and red fruits are offered into a bow shaped hearth. In the *puṣṭi homa*, golden robes are worn and a square hearth is constructed. The *abhicāra homa* (rite for destroying ‘evil ones opposed to him [the practitioner]’) employs a triangular hearth, “with a nine-tipped vajra in the center,” and the practitioner wears a black garment.³³ These prescriptions seem to remain constant across Tibetan manuals, although ritual implements and substances (such as skull bowls and *dhattura* seeds) often are added.³⁴

Again, each of these categories of *homa*, whether practiced to eliminate obstructions, subjugate adversaries, or destroy enemies, functions as an apotropaic act. For example, in the rites for pacification, *śāntikaṃ*, the *Durgatipariṣodhana* prescribes that the learned one (*viśāradaḥ*), clad in white garments, should offer “a whole series of *homa* sacrifices in order to eliminate the obstructions of sins, using

³² Skorupski (1983), pg. 403.

³³ Skorupski (1983), pgs. 68-73. While the hearth shapes are consistent with those prescribed in the Chinese *Susiddhikāra sūtra*, the robe colors vary slightly. It is my belief that the prescriptions came to Tibet via China rather than the ST drawing upon the same Sanskrit-language source (see Chapter Three).

³⁴ A more extensive discussion of the use of *dhattura* will be engaged in the next chapter. For the use of skulls in later *homa* performances, see, for example, the chapter on *homa* recorded based on the Yung-Ho-Kung cathedral rites (Lessing, 1942, pg. 151).

clarified butter and milk together with honey, parched rice and white mustard.”

Similarly, as a result of performing the *vaśya homa*, “all the [evil] divinities and the rest become subdued to his power.” And, correct performance of the *abhicāra homa* will “destroy all the obstruction of sins and so on of that embodied creature.”³⁵

Homa rites are employed in a number of other ritual contexts in the *Durgatipariśodhana*. For example, *homa* sacrifices generally are prescribed as a way to remove the evils and sins of those who have died. Along with other practices, the ‘auspicious one’ (*kuśalaḥ*) should call the name of the deceased and “offer the *homa* rite ten thousand times or as many as one hundred thousand times” and, as a result, the deceased “are released from the evils of great hells.”³⁶ In regards to handling the corpse particularly, it is prescribed that the *mantrin* should affix *mantras* on the various body parts. Then, “In order to eliminate evil rebirths . . . he should offer the *homa* sacrifice one hundred thousand times or as many as ten million times.”³⁷ In these cases, it is not a particular category of *homa* that is prescribed, but the apotropaic function is clear.

As in the Chinese *Susiddhikāra Sūtra* accounts, the Tibetan initiation of pupils (*abhiṣeka*) represents another important rite in which *homa* sacrifices are essential. In the *abhiṣeka* of pupils, *homa* sacrifices are prescribed in order to free the pupil of sin (*pāpaṃ*). The *vajra* teacher (*vajrasattvaḥ*) should “kindle a fire with sweet firewood and he should burn all his sins by performing a *homa* sacrifice with

³⁵ Skorupski (1983), pgs. 70-73.

³⁶ Ibid, pg. 82.

³⁷ Ibid, pg. 85.

sesame.” Taking the sesame, which represents sins of the pupil, he should burn the seeds and “imagine his sins as being burnt in his body by the multitude of blazing *vajras* coming out from the *homa* hearth.”³⁸ This visualization suggests the importance of how *homa* sacrifices function to combat and destroy internal afflictions.³⁹

Tibetan rituals also incorporated both external and internal forms of *homa*. Yael Bentor underscores the importance of *homa* performances in Tibetan culture and discusses how the rites are understood to have a demonifugic function. In both external and internal rites, emphasis is laid upon the transformative power of fire (“this power would seem to lie at the very foundation of its ritual usages.”)⁴⁰ In other words, fire serves as a medium to transform or manipulate both the outer and the inner. Bentor cites Sna-Ishogs-rang-grol, who describes the internal fire offerings as “the burning of the karmic propensities of mistaken conceptual thoughts.”⁴¹ Therefore, just as external rites function to combat and destroy physical enemies, internal offerings serve to burn away the obstacles that keep the practitioner from enlightened wisdom.

The *Kriyāsamgraha sūtra*, a Buddhist compendium of rituals translated into Tibetan and dated to approximately the 13th century, offers another perspective on the usages of *homa*. The text prescribes *homa* as a means to purify the ground of

³⁸ Ibid, pg. 105.

³⁹ Further paralleling the *Susiddhikāra Sūtra*, the *Durgatiparśodhana* prescribes that the *abhiṣeka* should be followed by a *śāntika homa*.

⁴⁰ Bentor (2000), pg. 595.

⁴¹ Ibid, pg. 603.

various impurities prior to the construction of monastic and other buildings. The importance of *homa* in this context is described as follows: “Just as defects located in different parts of the body cause people pain, in the same way, the impediments located in the ground cause harm, and the people living in such places endure undesirable effects.”⁴² The various *homas* are performed to neutralize these effects.

Finally, another group of texts utilized by Tibetan Buddhists include the *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, described by Siklos as Central Asian texts detailing ‘Śaiva-Buddhist’ practices. Here, although the word *homa* is not employed, the typical categories (*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, *abhicāraka*) are invoked.⁴³ Other lists of burnt offerings closely parallel the six magical rites (*ṣaṭkarmāṇi*) found in the Hindu *tantric* tradition, only with a number of additions. Specifically, burnt offerings are prescribed for the following:

Immobilizing a woman, pacifying, increasing, summoning, causing insanity, financial ruination, ruling all lands, enslaving, bringing a person and his wealth under control, bringing a king and his retinue under control, bringing all human worlds under control, bringing all women under control, driving away, bringing a person under control and summoning.⁴⁴

The implements used and substances burned include typical *homa* substances, such as sesame, black mustard, as well as many transgressive substances in various combinations, including *dhattura*, dog flesh, frog flesh, blood, and feces.⁴⁵

⁴² Skorupski (2002), pg. 30.

⁴³ Siklos (1996), pg. 61.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 16.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pg 61.

In summary, the categories and prescriptions for *homa* in Tibetan and Chinese sources parallel each other closely. In both traditions, *homa* rites are employed in the three basic rites (*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, *abhicārika*), in conjunction with initiation and funerary rites, and in internal as well as external forms. The parallels are not particularly surprising, as they both are categorized as Mahāyāna schools and allegedly based upon original translations of Indic texts. Chapter Three will question the Indic origin of these texts and argue, instead, for a more nuanced understanding of the genesis of *tantric* literature—literature produced primarily in Indo-Iranian regions.

Homa in Iranian and Zoroastrian Sources

Fire rituals comprise perhaps the most important aspect of Zoroastrian orthopraxy. Ritual fire accompanies most Zoroastrian ceremonies, including rites of passage, weddings, and funerals. Fire temples serve as locations for healing, where many Zoroastrians in India and Iran bring family members when they are ill. The term *haoma*, used mostly to designate the sacrificial plant or deity, is inseparable from the most quintessential rites and, quite possibly, originated in the Iranian context.

The etymology of the word *homa* is uncertain at best, but we can trace some historical usages of the term. The meaning of *homa* in the Indo-Iranian texts has changed over time and across religious traditions. The most ancient references to *homa* (*haoma*) are found in the Zoroastrian Canon, the Avesta. The dates attributed

to the Avesta vary, but scholars generally agree that portions are at least as old as the *R̥g Veda*, sometimes dated as early as 1700-1400 BCE.⁴⁶ In the Avesta, *haoma* is neither a name applied to a ritual nor a ritual act. Rather, *haoma* (like the Sanskrit *soma*) is a sacrificial plant and a deity.

In the *yasna* liturgy, the Zoroastrian priest pounds the *haoma* twigs while reciting multiple litanies to the deity Haoma, who is exalted for his demon-fighting qualities. The following verses (YIX: 16-18) give a good overall sense of how Haoma is invoked for the purpose of warding off ‘enemies’:

I make my claim on thee, O yellow one! For inspiration. I make my claim on thee for strength; I make my claim on thee for victory; I make my claim on thee for health and healing; I make my claim on thee for progress and increased prosperity, and vigour of the entire frame, and for understanding, of each adorning kind, and for this, that I may have free course among our settlements, having power where I will, overwhelming angry malice, and a conqueror of lies . . . Yea, I make my claim on thee that I may overwhelm the angry hate of haters, of the Daevas and of mortals, of the sorcerers and sirens, of the tyrants, and the Kavis, of the Karpans, murderous bipeds, of the sanctity-destroyers, the profane apostate bipeds, of the wolves four-footed monsters, of the invading host, wide-fronted, which with stratagems advance.⁴⁷

The demons that Haoma is asked to defeat are multiple: various sorcerers and *daevas* (*devs*) as well as hosts of demons from the animal kingdom. Therefore, what we can know is that the ritual efficacy common to the later *tantric homa* rites—namely, that the multiple demons are to be combated by the practice of ritual—is quite ancient.

⁴⁶ Boyce (1984), pg. 6-10.

⁴⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Avestan/Pahlavi translations by James Darmesteter in Max Mueller (1965: *Sacred Books of the East: The Zend-Avesta*).

In the Zoroastrian context, the substance *haoma* and god Haoma are central to this ritualized battle.

The origin and meaning of *haoma/soma* has long been debated. Most commonly, scholars have focused on properties and etymology of *soma/haoma* as a plant and deity. Many arguments seeking the botanical identity have been proposed over the years. These include identifying *haoma/soma* as a mushroom (Wasson, 1971), as ephedra (Modi, 1979), wine or beer (Hillebrandt, 1927), cannabis (Mukherjee, 1921) and *Peganum harmala* (Flattery and Schwartz, 1989).⁴⁸

Regardless of the botanical identification, evidence supports the claim that there existed a distinctively Indo-Iranian (pre-Vedic) *Soma/Haoma* cult. Based upon shared ritual terms such as **artharwan* (priest), *ṛṣi* (seer), and *ućig* (sacrificing priest), Mallory and Adams argue for a shared Indo-Iranian ritual substratum. Both Indian and Iranian groups “drank the juices of the pressed soma plant (Indo-Iranian **sauma* > Sanskrit *soma* and Avestan *haoma*),” thus suggesting, “the Proto-Indo-Iranians borrowed certain words from a presumably non-Indo-European culture.”⁴⁹ Thus, in all probability the practice of *soma/haoma* sacrifice existed prior to being recorded in the earliest religious texts, the *Ṛg Veda* and *Avesta*.

While treated as more or less as synonymous with *soma*, given the centrality of *haoma* to Zoroastrian high liturgies as well as several shorter rites, it is not

⁴⁸ Houben (2003) and Flattery/Schwartz (1989) offer the best summaries of the various proposals.

⁴⁹ Mallory and Adams (2006), pg. 77.

difficult to imagine that the term was applied to particular rituals.⁵⁰ Mary Boyce, in fact, has an article entitled “Haoma Rituals” which provides an overview of *yasna* and other Zoroastrian rites that incorporate *haoma*, including the *Drōn ī hōm* (Pahl.; Pers. *Hōm drōn*), the communal *nowruz* rite (which utilizes the ‘white’ *haoma*), and the *yazata haoma* (known in Persia as *Hōm Izad*).⁵¹ Therefore, the term ‘*homa*’ to designate a particular liturgy may well originate from the Avestan or Persian use of the term rather than from Vedic Sanskrit (where the term is scarcely employed).

Apart from textual references, data suggests that *haoma* sacrifices have long been practiced in Central Asia, often being associated with the authority of the ruling class. One of the many traditions, besides Zoroastrianism, that characterized ancient Iran is the religion of the Magi. From at least the time of Darius I (549-485 BCE), the Magi, a class of Medes, were the official priests of the Achaemenid kings.⁵² Though there has often been an assumption that the Magi were a class of Zoroastrian priests, recent scholarship suggests that the Magi largely represented beliefs that predate Zarathushtra⁵³ and were “anything but good Zoroastrians.”⁵⁴ In the Avesta, the term *magu* was employed to designate a particular social class, distinct from

⁵⁰ In early scholarship on the topic, Yasna often is referred to as ‘The Homa Ceremony’ (cf. Rawlinson, 1885, pg. 578 and Blunt, 1874, pg. 408),

⁵¹ Boyce (1997).

⁵² Cambridge history of Iran (1968), pg 141.

⁵³ This points to the problematic category of ‘Zoroastrian.’ Though most scholars treat Zoroastrianism as a singular tradition dating to perhaps the fourteenth century BCE, it is clear that there are, and have been, many ‘Zoroastrianisms.’ Particularly, many institutional changes occurred in Iranian religion with the appearance of the prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), whose dates are still hotly debated. For historical context pertaining to the many transmutations of the Zoroastrian faith, see Boyce (1974, 1984, and 2001).

⁵⁴ Young (1988), pg. 103.

Zoroastrian priests, who were referred to as *atharvans* (possessors of the fire).⁵⁵

Data, including ritual objects carrying Aramaic inscriptions discovered in Persepolis, further suggests that the Magi, among other functions, performed *haoma* sacrifices on behalf of the ruling class. In the opinion of Schmidt, who directed the excavations, many of these objects, “were destined for the preparation of haoma, an intoxicating beverage.”⁵⁶ As part of his evidence, he cites the use of the word *hwn* (*havana*), which designates the mortar used for pressing the *haoma* juice.

Furthermore, Schmidt discovered in Persepolis the impression of a seal depicting the ritual of *haoma* preparation. On it, two Magi are standing in front of an altar of fire; one of them is dressed in an elaborate belted coat with long sleeves, while the other is wearing a tiara-like head-dress made of thick felt (which Strabo ascribes to the Magi). One of them holds twigs, most likely the *barsom*, in his right hand while the other is extending sticks into the sacred fire. “We should also note that the Iranian personal name Haomadata (‘created by the deity Haoma’), which was later also found in Aramaic texts on Persepolis vessels, has long been known from the Aramaic papyri from the time of Artaxerxes I.”⁵⁷ Moreover, there is evidence that the inscriptions on the ritual vessels “prescribe a ceremony for preparing haoma which was performed by the Persian nobility, including the important military commanders of the Persepolis garrison.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Dandamaev (1989), pg. 330.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pg. 334.

⁵⁷ Ibid, pg. 335.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Therefore, the identification and purposes of *haoma* has long been debated, but it is clear that, at least in Achaemenid times, *haoma* was employed in royal ceremonies and that, most likely, the “court religious ritual was more in tune with earlier Indo-Iranian practice than with that advocated by Zoroaster.”⁵⁹ In short, it is clear that a variety of *haoma* rituals incorporated into the Zoroastrian ritual universe have long been practiced by other Indo-Iranian and Central Asian peoples.

Contemporary Homa Rites in South Asia

Performances and uses of *homa* rites in India represent a rich field of data for ritual studies. However, they have been, by far, the least-studied form of contemporary *homa* as well as of any form of so-called Vedic sacrifice. *Homa* represents a central ritual practice for Indians across the subcontinent, being performed by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain practitioners for a variety of purposes.

Many forms of *homa* exist in the contemporary Hindu context including, but not limited to, *homas* dedicated to particularly deities (such as Durga *homa*, Ganapati *homa*, Rudra *homa*) and *homas* performed for particular occasions (such as the *Vastu homa* to consecrate a new home, the *Viraja homa* associated with vows of a *saṃnyāsin*, and the *Punyahavacana homa* to accompany the naming of a child). These *homas* can be performed by a handful of priests, hundreds of priests, or by the lay community.

⁵⁹ Young (1988), pg. 102.

In contemporary practice, the Internet offers a variety of *homa* rites that can be performed by a Hindu priest, even in your home. One website describes the benefits of *homa* as follows:

This great ‘Maha Sudharsana Homam’ should be done with a clear and clean mind. Our thoughts and actions should be clean. By doing this great homam in our house (or) in office, evil things, our sorrows, are destroyed and are blessed with Victory, upliftment of life etc. So, perform this great Maha Sudharsana Homam and attain a great level in your life.⁶⁰

Even in the United States, one can sponsor a variety of *homa* sacrifices. A brochure from the Sambodh Society in Portage, Michigan offers a variety of *homa* services, such as the *mahamrityunjaya homa*, “for relief from chronic mental and physical illness” or Ganapati *homa* “for removing hurdles in business, work place, relationships and personal growth.”⁶¹

Homa performances need not be affiliated with a particular religious sect, but are practiced for general medicinal purposes as well. An online journal, the ‘Homa Health Newsletter’ provides a number of examples and explanations for how *homa* rites can be successful in healing a variety of ailments.⁶² And, while Jains doctrinally are prohibited from performing fire sacrifices (due to the harm it may cause to a variety of living beings), it is clear that *homa* rites historically have been, and continue to be, practiced by some Jains. Jinasena, a ninth-century Digambara *ācārya*, suggests that *homa* sacrifices indeed were acceptable for Jains, although suitable

⁶⁰ www.divyadesaonline.com

⁶¹ <http://www.sambodh.com/Brochure%20Rudra%2005.pdf>

⁶² <http://www.terapiahoma.com/print/HomaHealthNewsletter10.pdf>

“only on a conventional level.”⁶³ And in a contemporary context, R. Nagaswamy lists *śānti homa* as one of the eighteen essential Jaina temple rituals.⁶⁴

Finally, *homa* comprises a central element in the daily *pūjā* of particular deities, such as Śiva. For example, Richard Davis illustrates that *homa* comprises an essential component of the *nityapūjā* of Śiva in Siddhānta temple worship though he claims it plays a subordinate role to “the central act of linga worship.”⁶⁵ Here, the *homa* prescriptions are based primarily upon the *Śaivāgamas*.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to locate the origin of any of the above classifications of *homa*. However, we can trace usage of the term throughout various Indian literary genres. In the Vedic texts, as in most contemporary forms, *homa* does not represent an individual high liturgy. Rather, *homa* seems to either signify a ritual action, synonymous with oblation (and, as such, incorporated into larger ceremonies rather than a rite in and of itself) or a domestic ritual to be practiced by householders. In the *Tantric* and *Agāmic* literature, on the other hand, *homa* is employed as the name of a particular liturgy that comprises an essential component of daily practice.

Homa in Vedic Literature

Although *homa* allegedly originates from the Vedic period, references to *homa* in the earliest texts are almost non-existent. Bloomfield’s *Vedic Concordance* lists *homa* only once (*homa gantāram ūtaye*), and cites two witnesses for this phrase:

⁶³ quoted in Jaini (2000) pg. 235.

⁶⁴ From an online journal found at: <http://tamilartsacademy.com/journals/volume2/articles/jain-temple.html>

⁶⁵ Davis (1991), pg. 36.

RV 1.9.9 and AV 20.71.15. Although Bloomfield missed a few *homa* references, it is clear that the term was not as widespread as other terms related to the Vedic fire rites, such as *yajña* and *soma*. At least two other references to *homa* can be found in the *Ṛg Veda*, but these instances also encompass the generic meaning of ‘oblation’ and do not refer to a particular rite named *homa*.⁶⁶ Though some elements of *homa* can be found in Vedic sources, the term itself is not used as a common ritual designation.

Later Vedic texts do contain more references to *homa*, but it is still treated as an oblation or ritual sequence rather than an individualized rite. The *Śathapatha Brahmana* contains at least seventeen references to *homa* in the following compounds: *samiddhahoma* (‘libation,’ referenced three times), *vasāhoma* (‘oblation of gravy,’ eight references), *darvihoma* (‘spoon offerings,’⁶⁷ mentioned five times). The only reference to *homa* that indicates a particular liturgy is the compound *Apāmārgahoma*, described as a sacrifice involving the *apāmārga* plant, performed in order to ‘conquer the evil-doers’ and to ‘slay the rakshasas.’⁶⁸

In the *Śrauta* literature we first begin to see specific forms of *homa* discussed, though *homa* continues mostly to be used as a suffix, denoting the generic sense of oblations offered into a fire. The *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* mentions a number of *homās* including the *Avadāna-homa* (offering of body parts, such as the

⁶⁶See, for example, RV 8.63.4 and RV1.84.18 (*ko aghnimītte haviṣā ghṛtena srucā yajātā ṛtubhirdhruvebhiḥ | kasmai devā ā vahānāśu homa ko maṁsate vītihotraḥ sudevaḥ*).

⁶⁷In his translation of the Savayajña portion of the Kauśika Sūtras (60-68), Jan Gonda defines *darvihoma* as “a simple type of oblation of boiled rice made with a ladle” (Gonda, 1965, pg. 16).

⁶⁸ŚB 5.2.4.14-20.

heart and tongue, from an animal victim into the water),⁶⁹ the *vāta-homa* ('oblations of the wind'),⁷⁰ and the *vaisarjana* or *purṣābhi-homa* (offerings of clarified butter incorporated within the *agnicayana*).⁷¹

Similarly, the *Śrautakośa* lists several forms of oblations, most notably the *agnihotrahoma* ('the *agnihotra* offering') and *kāmyahoma* ('optional oblation'). The *homa* references in the *Śrautakośa* primarily are derived from the *Baudhyāyāna sūtras* of the Black Yajur Veda, all from *praśnas* twenty to twenty-three (collectively labeled '*Dvaidhasūtram*'). In these chapters *homa*, still translated simply as oblation, refers to the pouring of clarified butter into the fire and always is invoked as a ritual act within other ceremonies. In this context, various forms of *homa* appear, such as the *ājabhāgayor homa*, the *anūyājānām homa*, the *samiṣṭayajuṣo homa*, *ajyānīnām homa*, and many others.⁷² In all these cases, since no extensive prescriptions are given for *homa*, it seems clear that the term correctly is translated as 'offering' as opposed to being a distinctive sacrifice.

Of the four Vedic *Samhitās*, the *Atharva Veda Samhitā* (AVS) contains the most references to *homa* as well as the most ritual elements found in the later *tantric* rites.⁷³ Although the threefold categorization of *tantric homa* (*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, *abhicārika*) is employed in Atharvanic texts, this classification is not attributed to *homa* rites particularly. In the AVS, the word *homa* is rare and seems to designate

⁶⁹ See KātyŚS 1.1.16 (Ranade, pg. 4); 6.8 (Ranade, pg. 202-203).

⁷⁰ KātyŚS 18.6.1

⁷¹ KātyŚS 11.1.12 (Ranade, pg. 364); 8.7.1-2 (Ranade, pg. 274); 17.12.28.

⁷² Respectively, BaudŚS 20.13.1; 20.14.6; 20.15.3; 20.22.12 (Kashikar pgs. 1347, 1349, 1350, 1363).

⁷³ Chapter Four discusses the commonalities between Atharvanic ritual forms and specific elements of Tantric *homa* rites.

more of a ritual sequence, translatable as ‘oblation’ or ‘offering’, than it does an individual liturgy. In one case, *homa*, coupled with *gharma*, is described as a ‘thousand-slaying oblation’ (*homaḥ sahasrahaḥ*).⁷⁴ And, in AV 8.9.18, *homa* numbers seven, along with fuels, sweet things, seasons and sacrificial butters. However, none of the AVS references clearly designate *homa* as the name of an independent ritual.

Homa as a Domestic Rite

Homa as an independent ritual appears first in the domestic *sūtras*, specifically the *Gṛhyasūtras* and the *Gṛhya* portion of the *Kauśika sūtra*. Kane offers a brief description of the procedure for *homa* compiled from a number of the *Gṛhyasūtras*, where it accompanies rites of marriage and the *garbhādhāna* (impregnation rite). However, the *homa* described has little in common with the later *tantric* forms. First, the substances offered include only clarified butter (*ājya* offering) and boiled food in a ladle (*darvihoma*). Second, the offerings are not offered into a *kuṇḍa* pit, but into an altar “raised to the height of two or for finger breadths.”⁷⁵ And, third, it requires multiple priests, rather than being performed by a single officiant. The *Gṛhya* portion of the *Kauśika sūtra* does make several references to *homa* as an independent liturgy that more closely foreshadows its later

⁷⁴ AV. 8.8.17. The whole passage reads: *Gharmaḥ samidyo agnināyam homaḥ sahasrahaḥ bhavaśca pṛśnibāhuśca śarva senāmamūm hatam* (Roth & Whitney, 1966, pg. 187).

⁷⁵ Kane (1968), pg. 209.

tantric counterpart, but it is still restricted to the domestic sphere and generally performed within other ceremonies.

The association of *homa* as a domestic rite continues in the *Manu Smṛti*. The *Śabda-Kalpadrūm*, citing the *Manu Smṛti*, refers to *homa* as an individual type of sacrifice included in the five great sacrifices (*pañcamahāyajñāntargatayajñviśeṣa*).⁷⁶ Elsewhere, MS 3.70 prescribes *homa* as one of the required domestic rituals, to be practiced by householders along with *tarpaṇa* and *bali*.⁷⁷

Later texts belonging to the Atharva Veda contain more references to *homa*. In the first *adhyāya* of the *KauśS*, primarily concerned with the *gṛhya* rites,⁷⁸ three types of *homas* are listed as ‘rites offered to Agni’: the *pārvaṇahomau* (*homas* offered at new and full moon) *saṃṛddhihomāḥ* (the *homas* for increase/prosperity) and *kāmyahomāḥ* (optional *homas*).⁷⁹ Repeatedly, the *Kauṣika Sūtra* also refers to ‘initial’ and ‘final’ *homas* (*purastāddhomāḥ* and *saṃsthitahomāḥ*) and ‘complete *homas*’ (*pūrṇahomāḥ*).⁸⁰ It seems as if at the time of this *sūtra*’s composition, *homa* was developing into a common ritual term, designating an individual domestic ritual rather than a generic term denoting oblation.

⁷⁶ Rādhakāntadev (1966), pg 552. The use of *viśeṣa* implies the distinction of *homa* as an individual type of sacrifice, distinct or different from the other five *mahāyajña*.

⁷⁷ “Teaching (and studying) is the sacrifice (offered) to Brahman, the (offerings of water and food called) Tarpaṇa the sacrifice to the manes, the burnt oblation the sacrifice offered to the gods, the Bali offering that offered to the Bhūtas, and the hospitable reception of guests the offering to men” (*adhyāpanam brahmajajñam pitṛyajñas tu tarpaṇam homo daivo balir bhauto ṛyajño ’atithipūjanam*) Bühler (1970), pg. 87-88.

⁷⁸ See Modak (1993), pg. 58.

⁷⁹ KauśS 1.5.4; ‘*prāk sviṣṭakṛtaḥ pārvaṇahomau saṃṛddhihomāḥ kāmyahomāś ca*’ (Bloomfield, 1972). Translation my own.

⁸⁰ Monier Williams equates *pūrṇahoma* with *pūrṇāhuti* and defines it as ‘a complete oblation’ (pg. 642). All references offered by him are from Atharvan literature.

Therefore, unlike the treatment of *homa* in Buddhist *tantras*, *homa* in the early Vedic literature is treated either as a non-specific oblation or as a rite limited to the domestic sphere. Many features of the domestic *homa*, including the substances used and ritual structure, demonstrate significant divergences between Vedic and *tantric* forms of *homa*.

Homa in Hindu Tantric and Medieval Sources

Medieval texts categorized as Vedic contain descriptions of *homa* that closely parallel the *tantric* rite, but these appear in relatively late texts and almost certainly were influenced by *tantric* developments. For example, Witzel cites chapters 34 and 75 of the “comparatively late, medieval” *Agnipurāṇa*, which deal with a *homa* ritual dedicated to Viṣṇu and Śiva respectively at some length. In an endnote, he characterizes the *homa* ceremonies as *tantric*, writing that they almost always were practiced with one fire and not three.⁸¹ It is also well known that large portions of the text were late insertions by Kujjika *tantrikas*.⁸² Therefore, throughout the *purāṇa*, we find nomenclature characteristic of *tantric* rites including *kuṇḍa*, *sarṣapa*, *homa*, *homayet*, *maṇḍala*, etc. Such nomenclature can be found in other *purāṇas*, such as the *Brahma-purāṇa*, *Matsya-purāṇa*, and portions of the *Śiva-purāṇa*, but with far less frequency.

⁸¹ Witzel (1992), pg. 796/819.

⁸² See K. R. van Kooij, Marie-Therese de Mallmann, and others on this point.

The use of the term *homa* to designate a particular liturgy develops most clearly in *tantric* texts. Hindu *tantric* texts, unlike the early Vedic corpus, often invoke *homa* as a distinctive rite and not merely as a ritual action (oblation or offering) to be employed in larger ceremonies. References to *homa* abound in the *tantras* and, in fact, are too numerous to list here. However, several passages regarding *homa* reveal certain patterns that can give us a clue to how the rite was treated in the *tantric* literature. Many of the hundreds of references to *homa* in the *tantric* literature, given within the list of related rites, reveal that it was prescribed as one of the essential rites of *tantrikas*. Sanjukta Gupta writes, “The traditional divisions of a Tantric pūjā are six, viz. *dhyāna* (meditation), *pūjā* (offering), *japa*, *homa* (fire-sacrifice), *nyāsa*, and *tarpaṇa*.”⁸³ However, this division represents only one categorization of *tantric* practice generally and of *homa* particularly. Tantric texts list *homa* in various other configurations. For example, the *Śāradātilakam* lists *homa* among a group of six rites (*nyāsa*, *japa*, *pūjā*, *homa*, *tarpaṇa* and *abhiṣeka*)⁸⁴ as well as one of a set of four rites (*karmacatuṣṭayam*) including *dhyāna*, *japa*, *homa*, and *pūjā*.⁸⁵ The *Kulārṇava Tantra* lists *homa* as one of the fivefold *upāsanā* called *puraścaraṇa* (preparatory rites), along with daily *pūjā*, *japa*, *tarpaṇa* and feeding of

⁸³ Gupta (1979), pg. 136.

⁸⁴ *nyāsa-japa-pūjā-homa-tarpaṇa-abhiṣekasampaataapaataadiḥ* (from introduction of STT)

⁸⁵ *pūjāṃ dhyānaṃ japaṃ homaṃ tasmāt karmacatuṣṭayam* (STT, 142).

the *brahmanas*.⁸⁶ Similarly, the *Nīla Tantra*, another *kaula* text, lists *homa* with *japa*, *tarpaṇa* and *brāhmaṇabhojanam*, as a component of *puraścaraṇa*.⁸⁷

The *Mantramahodadhi*, a sixteenth century *tantric* compendium, offers a slightly different list of practices required of a *sādhaka*, including *bhūtaśuddhi* (purification of the elements), *ātmaprāṇapratiṣṭhā* (‘establishing the life breaths into oneself’), *māṭṛkānyāsa* (assigning syllables on the body), *puraścaraṇa* (‘the preliminary ritual’), *homa* (fire sacrifice), and *tarpaṇa* (‘pouring libations’).⁸⁸

Homa also appears as a central ritual employed in the six magical rites (*ṣaṭkarmāṇi*). The *Mantramahodadhi* and *Śaradātilaka* detail the various prescriptions for *homa*, including types of wood and substances, shapes of fire-pits, and qualities of flames (‘tongues’) appropriate for each of the six rites.⁸⁹ *Śāntihoma* and *puṣṭihoma* are commonly referenced in the Hindu *tantras*, but *abhicāra homa* per se is rarely invoked. However, the six magical rites and the correlating prescriptions in many ways parallel the three, four, or fivefold divisions of Buddhist *homa*.

Once again, the above represents only some of the ways in which *homa* sacrifices were employed. In Hindu *tantras*, as in the Buddhist *tantras*, *homa* represents one of the rites to be performed for those who have died. The *caryāpāda* section of the *Makutāgama* (16-18) details the various implements, substances, and

⁸⁶ Pandit (1973), pg. 111 (from Ullāsa 15).

⁸⁷ *Japahomau tarpaṇam ca saikabrāhmaṇabhojanam. Pañcāṅgopāsanam loke puraścaraṇamucyate*, seventh paṭala; Śarma (1965), pg. 22.

⁸⁸ Bühnemann, *Iconography* (2000), pg. 9.

⁸⁹ Bühnemann, *Six Rites* (2000), pg. 451.

rites involved with *śrāddha*: “Please listen. Oblation to fire (*homa*), *tyāga*, *piṇḍa*, *viśvadeva*, sesamum, *kuśā*, . . . the container for oblation (*arghapātra*), *rakṣā*, *sūtra* (the protective thread), *apasavya* and *vikir* are known as the various accessories and ingredients of the ceremony of the last rites for the ancestors.”⁹⁰

Homa also commonly accompanied the coronation (*abhiṣeka*) of a king or adept. For example, the *Ahīrbudhnya Saṁhitā*, (an eighth century *Pāñcarātra* text) prescribes that the ideal *purohita* performs the *Sudarsana homa* for the king; at the end of which the king, “seated on a consecrated throne, is anointed.”⁹¹ White describes the power afforded the king via the royal *abhiṣeka* as follows: “ruling from his capital at the conceptual center of the universe, the king is strategically located at the pivot of the prime channel of communication between upper and lower worlds—between the human, the divine, and the demonic—which he keeps ‘open’ through the mediation of his religious specialists.”⁹²

This royal *abhiṣeka* likely serves as a model for the *tantric abhiṣeka*, also performed by a guru and commenced with a *homa* fire sacrifice, but this time on behalf of his adept (*sādhakam*).⁹³ Here, the *maṇḍala* of *tantric* ritual practice, a “mesocosmic template through which the Tantric practitioner transacts with and

⁹⁰ Ghose (1996), pg. 77.

⁹¹ *homānte rājño abhiṣekaḥ; homāvasānasamaye prayoge apyatra tadguruḥ | tatra rājānamāhūya pūrvavanmantritāsane* (46:21, Ramanujacharya, 1986, pg. 443). And, *homānte kumbhodakena rājño abhiṣekaḥ; homakarmaṇi nirvṛtte tattatkumbhodakaistataḥ | yantrapī athe samāropya rājānamabhiṣecayet* (47:36, Ramanujacharya, pg. 450). For ideal *purohita* duties detailed in Chapter 46 of this *Saṁhitā* see Schrader (1916), pg. 132.

⁹² White (2003), pg. 125.

⁹³ See, for example, the seventh *paṭala* of the *Nīla Tantra* (Śarmā, 1965, pg. 24-25).

appropriates the myriad energies that course through every level of the cosmos,” can be likened to the king’s “millenarian royal conquest of the four directions.”⁹⁴

Finally, Hindu *tantras* also contain prescriptions for internal *homa*. For example, though the *Jnana-Sankalini-Tantra* lists *homa* as one of the forms of exoteric practice (*karmāṇi*) that are to be given up by a “learned Brahma-Jnanin,”⁹⁵ the text later makes the case that the rites are not entirely given up. Rather, they are internalized. The true meaning of *homa* comes not from the external offering into the fire, but, instead, true *homa* is “the offering of the butter of life in the fire of Brahma at the time of Samadhi.”⁹⁶ And, in the *Somaśambhupaddhati* the *homa* that accompanies *dikṣā* (initiation) rites appears in both external and internal forms. First, there is the ‘initiation ceremony,’ which requires an exoteric *kuṇḍa* and *maṇḍala*, followed by ‘initiation by knowledge,’ performed only by mental activity.⁹⁷

In summary, in the Hindu *tantric* literature, there exist multiple contexts within which external *homa* rites are performed, often paralleling the employment of *homa* in the Buddhist *tantric* texts. *Homa* accompanies initiation and funerary rites as well as being performed as a means to control the external and internal world; either by averting evil influences or by bringing the self and others under control.

⁹⁴ White (2003), pg. 125. Davidson points out that this connection in the Buddhist context. He writes, “the central and defining metaphor for mature esoteric Buddhism is that of an individual assuming kingship and exercising dominion” (2002, pg. 121).

⁹⁵ “*mantrapūjā tapo dhyānam homam japyam balikriyām saṁnyāsam sarvakarmāṇi laukikāni tyajed budhaḥ*” Kulabhooshan, pg. 33.

⁹⁶ *Na homam homamityāhuḥ samadhau tatta bhūyate brahmāgnau hūyate prāṇam homakarma taducyate*. Kulabhooshan, pg. 21.

⁹⁷ Brunner-Lachaux, Vol. III (1963), pg. 37.

Conclusion

In the Hindu context, the word '*homa*' as specific liturgy occurs frequently from the *tantric* period on, but early Vedic references to *homa* are scarce. *Homa* rites are considered Vedic in origin, but other sacrificial terms, such as *yajña* and *soma*, appear far more frequently than the word *homa* in the early texts. It is clear that the term was not widespread and, when used, it is most often employed in a non-specific manner or as a suffix indicating oblation or offering.

Homa as the name of an independent liturgy did not receive widespread usage in the Hindu context until the *tantric* period. Strickmann, in questioning *homa*'s continuity with Vedic rites, proposes that to find *homa* in the Hindu context one should look to the *tantric* material, not the Vedic.⁹⁸ He also argues that the first occurrence of the word *homa* as the name of a specific rite can be found in Buddhist literature, specifically the two Chinese texts translated by Bodhiruci (ca. 509).⁹⁹

Although it may be impossible to establish a complete etymological evolution of *homa*, it is clear that the usage of the term has been employed in various manners in the Indo-Iranian texts. In all the texts, whether speaking of the substance/deity '*haoma*' or the name of a fire sacrifice called '*homa*', the term has been consistently employed in relationship to the ritual battle against evil. The Zoroastrian tradition first applied the term to a sacrificial substance and a mythological figure. The term *homa* as a particular rite seems to have entered the

⁹⁸ Strickmann (1983), pg. 419.

⁹⁹ Ibid, pg. 434.

Buddhist tantric tradition next, being found first in Bodhiruci's translations. *Homa* as the name of a high liturgy only later become widespread in the Hindu context and primarily in the *tantric* literature. Today, *homa* represents one of the most widespread ritual terms used by Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, and other practitioners throughout South, Central, and East Asia.

Given their extensiveness and durability, *homa* rituals exemplify a paradigmatic ritual field. Regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof, *homa* and related fire rituals continue to provide a meaningful and practical means of dealing with the adversity and challenges that face human existence. A study of the trans-regional elements of *homa* rites can reveal important insights regarding historical contacts and exchanges as well as the meaning of ritual as it is developed in various Asian contexts.

Chapter Three: *Indo-Iranian Origins of Tantric Homa Rites*

Homa, an important *tantric* rite in Buddhism and Hinduism, generally is described as a fire sacrifice practiced to ward off various demons or afflictions, both internal and external. Scholars generally assume that this *tantric* rite has its origins in the Indian or Vedic ritual paradigm.¹ The origins of *homa*, however, extend beyond the borders of what can be considered Vedic or Indian.² Specifically, similar oblation offering rites have a long history in the Iranian, or Persian, region.

The Indo-Iranian regions of Gandhāra and Kashmir have historically represented cultural bridges between Central, South, and East Asia. This is significant due to the fact that these areas were centers of Buddhist and Hindu intellectual activities during the beginning of the *tantric* period. Therefore, it seems logical that the *tantric homa* developed in geographical areas where Indo-Iranian cultural influences were strong. Although *tantric* forms of *homas* share certain features with Vedic or Brahmanical rites,³ they more closely parallel the development of the ritual paradigm in the Zoroastrian tradition. This chapter will

¹Cf. Gupta (1979), Payne (2000), Skorupski (1983), Slusser (1982), Verardi (1994), Diehl (1956), Gonda (1970), White (2000), etc

² Grether (2007).

³ Though Tajima claimed that the Buddhist *tantric homa* has nothing in common with *brahmānical* forms of *homa* (quoted in Verardi, 1994, pg. 46).

argue that *homa* did not develop exclusively within a Vedic context. Several *tantric homa* elements, including the texts, nomenclature, substances, and structures, can be traced to Central or Inner Asian regions.

It has generally been assumed that *tantric* Buddhism originates in India and only later is exported to East Asia. As such, it has been presumed that Central Asia historically has served merely as “a passive conduit” for the spread of *tantra* without “contributing to its development in any significant way.”⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that the origins of *homa* have been so consistently considered Indic in origin.

In searching for the origins of *tantra* generally, and *homa* rites specifically, what we find is a complicated blending of cultures, religions and practices that draw from elements originating in both Central and South Asia. It would be “sheer cultural chauvinism”⁵ to maintain that esoteric Buddhism was wholly exported from India and that Central Asia played no role in its development. Central Asia, particularly the Iranian regions, has long served as a dense point of contact between India and East Asia.

Homa takes various forms in the many places where it has been practiced, including India, Tibet, Mongolia, Bali, Japan, and China, but its basic structure and efficacy seem to remain relatively constant. The pattern followed by all *homa* rites includes the invocation of multiple deities, offerings of various substances into the fire of wisdom, the sprinkling of water accompanied with *mantra* recitation, and leave taking. The apotropaic, or demonifugic, function attributed to *homa* rites is

⁴ Gibson, pg. 37.

⁵ Gibson, pg. 43.

explicit in both Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* sources. Various texts enjoin that *homa* be performed to counter the multiple internal and external afflictions wrought by demonic beings (*māras* or *grahas*).

Fire Rites in the Indo-Iranian Region

Homa, like most religious beliefs or practices, cannot be located temporally or geographically. Rather, there exists a multilayered nexus of overlapping influences. Although various *homas* generally follow the same basic pattern and efficacy, the rites change as they move through time and space. For example, *homa* in Japan has developed in relation to cultural meanings specific to Japanese culture. Even the Shingon and Tendai Japanese *homas* represent varying ritual paradigms, with a plethora of variations within each branch.

Any single form of *homa* represents a product of a particular society or group, not easily defined by a category. Therefore, *homa* appears at times as a political rite associated with kingship⁶ and other times as an accompaniment to domestic rituals.⁷ In other contexts, *homa* can be best characterized as a mystical rite, seen most clearly in the tantric descriptions of internalized *homa*.⁸ The point here is that *homa* acquires a multiplicity of meanings, derived not from any original source, but from the polyvalence of discourses and meanings in a given context. This having been said, there are certain common elements shared by all tantric *homas*. While I

⁶ White (2000), pg. 25.

⁷ I refer here to the Grhya *homa*, which seems to be the model for the most common form of *homa* practiced in India today.

⁸ Cf. Bentor (2000).

admit that we cannot find the ‘origin’ of any of these elements, I will try to demonstrate that the various forms of *tantric homa* seem to emerge out of an Indo-Iranian rather than a Vedic ritual paradigm.

It should come as no surprise that those elements of *tantric homa* that are found in Vedic sacrifice also appear in the early Zoroastrian material. It has long been accepted that the early Avestan and Vedic texts are close linguistically and culturally with shared deities, nomenclature, and concepts. Asko Parpola develops an historical argument that the civilization of the BMAC (Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex), beginning from the Central Asian Steppe, proliferated throughout the Iran, Afghanistan, and Northern India with Kāfiristān as one of the primary cultural bridges to South Asia.⁹ Many *homa* elements likely evolve from this pre-Vedic, Indo-Iranian substratum.

Parpola describes how central elements of Vedic sacrifice, such as the use of *soma*, were brought to India in subsequent waves of BMAC Aryans. He writes, “Analysis of the Vedic texts suggests that the principal new element introduced by the last wave of Proto-Indo-Aryans to come to southern Central Asia was the worship of Indra with the drink called *Sauma* (whence Vedic *Soma* and Avestan *Haoma*) and in all likelihood prepared out of plants of the genus *Ephedra*.”¹⁰ He locates ritual artifacts, such as vessels containing remnants of Ephedra and bundles of Ephedra twigs in early BMAC sites of Ganur and Togolok 21 in Margiana to support his argument of transmission. Other elements found in the later *śrauta* rites

⁹ Parpola (2002), pg. 241.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 245.

also seem to originate from the BMAC. For example, Parpola locates the pattern of the eagle central to the *agnicayana* rite in early BMAC seals and points to Avestan hymns that reference the god of victory as a great bird *Saena* (Skt. *śyena*).¹¹ In short, Parpola argues that primary elements of early Vedic ritual have their origins outside India. Several of these elements thrived and developed in the northwestern regions of Kāfiristān, Gandhāra, and Kashmir, where *tantric* forms of *homa* likely developed.

Indo-Iranian origin of Homa's Ritual Elements

Based upon archaeological and textual evidence, it is clear that the Indo-Iranian regions extending from present day Afghanistan through Gandhāra, Kashmir, and Tibet were the home of a core of ideas and practices that were shared by Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Hindus that were then transmitted to East Asia. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the elements of the *tantric homa* rites can be found also in the Zoroastrian fire sacrifice, the *yasna*. This constitutes further evidence that *tantric homa* rites developed not out of Vedic India, but, rather, from within an Indo-Iranian ritual paradigm shared by Persian traditions.

Although it is problematic to reify 'ritual paradigms', the liturgical system revealed by *tantric homas* more closely parallels Zoroastrian ritual structures than it does the Vedic paradigm. Elements of *homa* such as the structure of the rite, role of the main priest, ritual implements used, *mantric* recitation, and the mesocosmic

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 304-308.

function of the ritual space are to be counted among those that are shared with the sacrifice (*yasna*) of the Zoroastrians.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the *yasna* is essentially the same as *tantric homa* or even that all the *homas* found in *tantric* traditions are the same. Regarding this point, Strickmann cautions that we should not treat *homa* as a mystic rite that travels, intact, through various cultures and time periods. He posits that “such semantic looseness . . . threatens to obscure meaningful distinctions among radically different types of ritual structures and social institutions.”¹² Likewise, we should be careful not to reduce the significance and complexity of the *yasna* liturgy. The dynamic nature of the *yasna* has inspired a variety of comparative projects—from Middle Eastern ritual idioms to the Catholic Mass. As Michael Stausberg points out, the comparative context changes the way in which *yasna* is depicted and understood.¹³

My intention here is not to silence the differences between the rites. I grant that there are real differences between the fire rites of Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Hindu practitioners. For example, in the Zoroastrian *yasna*, offerings are not put directly into the fire, but only offered symbolically.¹⁴ Also, the *yasna* still involves the preparation of an exhilarating or intoxicating libation—an aspect *not* present in the *tantric homa*. Significant theological differences also distinguish the interpretation of ritual in each tradition (see Chapter Six). My purpose in invoking

¹² Strickmann (2002), pg. 202.

¹³ Stausberg (2004), pg. 19.

¹⁴ A difference noted even by Herodotus in 455 BCE (Boyce, 1984, pg. 63).

only similarities here is not to obscure cultural and religious differences, but only to highlight some affinities between the rites. Again, the structure and efficacy of the *tantric homa* reveals a ritual paradigm that has been informed by a geographic and cultural proximity to Persian communities, as opposed to a straight-line evolution out of Vedic India.

Ritual Structure

Many structural elements shared by all *homa* rites also have a parallel in the performance of *yasna*. First, Strickmann lays out the basic structure of the Buddhist *homa*, first described in the *Collected Dhārani sutras* (ca. 650). The rite is described as follows:

Here, we are close to the mature rite; its basic outline has been established. First comes the evocation and propitiation of Agni, the intermediary, a preliminary fire offering that prepares the way. This is followed by a full-scale summoning of the celestial hierarchy. They too descend to the fire altar in order of rank, where each receives various oblations in accordance with his nature and functions . . . The rite completed, he dismisses them. This is a simple picture of Homa as still performed today.¹⁵

This full summoning of the celestial hierarchy includes the invitation to specific deities as well as to the sun, moon, stars, etc. This pattern of invitation represents one of the oldest known ritual elements, being noted as early as Herodotus. The structure of the rite, proceeding from invitation to offerings into the fire, and then to dismissal, is followed in all *tantric homa* rites.

¹⁵ Strickmann (1983), pg. 434.

The climactic point in the structure of *tantric homa* is the merging of the ritual fire with both the divinity and the practitioner. Verardi derives a description of this moment in the Buddhist context from the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (circa 5th century). He writes:

The Bodhisattvas of the stele are actually evoked and induced to perform the actions that are proper to their descending function. The ritual is centered upon the visualization by the officiant of the Bodhisattva to whom it is addressed and to whom the officiant proceeds to identify or otherwise unite. These stele are capable of expressing the unity of the interior mind made of fire, evoked divinity and officiant, of which we are told by texts such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*.¹⁶

This merging is also explained in Payne’s translation of a ritual manual for the performance of *homa* to Mañjuśrī, where the officiant invites Mañjuśrī to leave his original location in the cosmic *maṇḍala* and be present in the ritual arena. He writes that, at this point, “the fire is identical with the dharmakāya fire of wisdom . . . the fire is nothing other than the wisdom within the practitioner’s body.”¹⁷ Therefore, the practitioner not only invites the bodhisattva in the form of fire but also self-identifies with this fire of wisdom.

This ritual pattern, including the identification with the deity, is basically the same as that described in the Hindu forms of *tantric homa*. As in the Buddhist *homa*, the rite begins with an invitation. According to Diehl’s account, the practitioner first draws lines for the *sthaṇḍila*, or sacrificial ground, with a bundle of *darbha* grass, while reciting *mantras*. Then, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and various other celestial beings are

¹⁶ Verardi (1994), pg. 18.

¹⁷ Payne (2000), pg. 493.

invoked.¹⁸ The fire altar is prepared by sprinkling *arghya* water. In the process, each direction is acknowledged and ‘worshipped’ while the deities are invoked.¹⁹ Then, the *tantric* priest identifies bodily with the deity (present in the form of the ritual fire). Gonda describes this moment as follows:

Fire is procured in accordance with the prescripts, worshipped with the *mulamantra* and ‘united’ with the fire of the *mulādhāra*, i.e. the lowermost power centre (*cakra*) and with that of the *bindu* on the forehead. Thus the worshipper enacts his unification with the fire in which now Agni’s spirit (*caitanya*) is introduced . . . After that the worshipper must unite the arteries of his (yogic) body (*nāḍī*) with those of Śiva-of-the-temple and of Śiva-of-the-fire, creating a sort of luminous circuit between these and proceed to perform the fire sacrifice (*homa*), consisting of oblations of ghee, and accompanied by offerings of fried rice grain, sugar-cane, flowers, etc.²⁰

After the unification with the deity, there is a “luminous circuit” opened between the macrocosmic Śiva and microcosmic performer. Diehl describes the divine presence of the fire as follows: “It [the fire] is now considered to be ‘Śiva-fire’ and after some fire has been thrown to the south west as the portion of Rākṣasas, it is invoked to be present and considered to be the form of intelligence (*caitanyarupamāka*).”²¹

This basic structure of the *homa* rites, common to both Buddhists and Hindus, is also followed in the performance of the Zoroastrian *yasna*. Specifically, the *yasna* proper includes the invitation to all divine beings, offerings to the fire, and

¹⁸ Diehl (1956), pg. 124.

¹⁹ Gonda (1970), pg. 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Diehl (1956), pg. 125.

leave taking.²² Before the chief priest (*zaotar*) enters the ritual space, he engages in a conversation with his assistant, replicating an exchange between Ahura Mazda and Zarathushtra. This standing in for Ahura Mazda reaffirms the priest's role as "representative of the Lord of Wisdom and the creative and sustaining purpose of the Yasna liturgy."²³ After entering the ritual space, he recites the Ahunawar *mantra* eight times, designating all holy spirits (*yazads*). Dastur Kotwal explains that he invites all "the arch angels, angels and all pure space—all divine space—so we feel the divine presence within the ritual precinct in which we perform the ceremony."²⁴

The whole rank of divine beings are invited to become manifest in the *gētīg* world primarily for the purpose of protection. Briefly, the Pahlavi terms *mēnōg* and *gētīg* are central to the Zoroastrian theological interpretation of the *yasna* liturgy. The *mēnōg* realm encompasses all the universal ordering principles of the world from which the material changing world, the *gētīg*, derives its existence. In contrast to the Platonic world-view, in Zoroastrianism, the finite world "is understood as a positive manifestation and completion of the *mēnōg* realm rather than a shadowy, imperfect reflection of it."²⁵ The *yasna* liturgy opens a circuit between the *mēnōg* and *gētīg* realms. Kotwal and Boyd point out the importance of maintaining this open channel throughout the liturgy by continual bodily contact with the *barsom* bundle:

²² During Avestan times, the *yasna* required eight priests. Now it is performed by one chief priest (*zaotar*) and an assistant (*rāspī*). The number of Ahunawar *manthras* recited varies depending upon the spirit beings (*yazads*) invoked (Kotwal and Boyd, 1991, pg. 86).

²³ Kotwal and Boyd (1991). Pg 9.

²⁴ Williams and Boyd (1982).

²⁵ Kotwal and Boyd (1991), pg. 4.

The *barsom*, it will be recalled, is a bundle of twenty-one wires which serves as a conduit between this *gētīg* world and the *mēnōg* realm, i.e., the consecrated *barsom* establishes a *paywand*, a connecting link between the finite world of human endeavor and the universal realm which is temporally and ontologically prior to and the very source of our existence. The officiating priest, by maintaining continual contact with the *barsom* and invoking sacred *mānthra*, becomes both the bestower and receiver of the powers and blessings conveyed through this sacramental channel.²⁶

Therefore, the chief priest not only stands in for Ahura Mazda himself, he also receives and directly channels the blessings and powers produced by the performance of the ritual.

A climactic moment in the *yasna*, like in the *tantric homa*, is the merging of the ritual fire with the main deity, in this case Ahura Mazda. Hintze characterizes this portion of the rite as the center of the *yasna* liturgy, both temporally and conceptually. The priest invites the heavenly fire to merge with the ritual fire—which is addressed as Ahura Mazda’s most beautiful shape (Y 36.6). He writes, “It must therefore be assumed that from *that* moment of the ritual onwards, the worshippers believe themselves to be in the presence of Ahura Mazda, who has become visible to them in the form of the ritual fire before which they stand.”²⁷ Offering fragrant woods into the fire and the preparation of a *haoma* libation follows the invitation to the multiple *yazads* and the uniting of earthly and divine fires. Although only fragrant woods are actually put into the fire, other ritual substances, such as the *haoma* libation and the sacred bread (*dron*), are symbolically offered to

²⁶ Ibid, pg. 19.

²⁷ Hintze (2004), pg. 294.

the fire.²⁸ The offerings are followed by a ritualized exit leading to the final moment of the rite, when the remainder of the *haoma* oblation is poured into the community well. The ritually pure *haoma* juice thus fuses with the waters that sustain the Zoroastrian faithful.

Therefore, although there are significant differences between the various *homas* and the Zoroastrian *yasna*, there are a number of shared structural elements that suggest overlapping ritual paradigms. For example, the sequence of events follows from invitation, offerings into the fire of wisdom, and exit. Although each system incorporates theologically specific *mantras* and inserts individualized ritual actions, the core structure of the three ritual systems follows the same basic pattern. Observable data suggests that other elements of *homa* fire sacrifices, including the texts in which the rites are prescribed, can be traced to the Persian, or Inner Asian, regions.

Texts Pertaining to Homa

A significant portion of Buddhist and Hindu *tantras* were composed in Indo-Iranian regions, such as Kashmir, Gandhāra, and the Swāt Valley. Moreover, Chinese Buddhist texts, allegedly transmitted directly from India, were translated from scripts found most prominently in Central Asia, not in India. Even when specific *tantras* are translated into Chinese from Sanskrit, it does not prove that they

²⁸ The *dron* is a flat cake pierced with nine holes. Also, an outdoor Zoroastrian rite, the *Afrinagan*, incorporates several other substances such as grains, beans, and flowers that parallel the variety of substances found in the various forms of *homa*. The Buddhist *homa* also has a number of 'symbolic' rather than literal offerings to the fire; cf. Saso (1991), pg. 85.

derived from an Indian source text, since, for centuries, Sanskrit was commonly used in Central Asia. Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hsien and Hsuan-chuang record that the monks of Central Asia were “all students of the language of India.”²⁹

The main texts used as ritual manuals in East Asia include the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, the *Saravatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, the Collected *Dhāraṇīsūtras*³⁰ and the *Susiddhikāra Sūtra*. There exists no extant Sanskrit version of any of these texts and only certain *mantras* have been maintained in the original *Siddham* script. Most scholars agree that “virtually all of the Indic texts transmitted to China”³¹ were originally written in Central Asian scripts, such as *Gandhārī*, and “with only a few exceptions, these [Chinese] translations are of Mahāyāna texts brought by Kushan, parthian, and Sogdian emissaries.”³² Although Daniel Boucher questions whether or not Chinese translators *saw* such texts (rather than hearing them and transmitting them orally), it has been well accepted for decades that the texts originate from a language more characteristic of Indo-Iranian regions than specifically Indian.³³

Moreover, given the early dates attributed to Chinese translations of certain *tantras*, it is very likely that they were not only written in Inner Asia, but that they came to India only *after* they were translated in China and Tibet, if they even

²⁹ Puri (1987), pg. 177; 181.

³⁰ For discussion of the Collected *Dhāraṇīsūtras*, see Strickmann (1990).

³¹ Boucher (1998), pg. 471.

³² Boucher (2008), pg. 83.

³³ Boucher (1998), pg. 471.

reached India at all.³⁴ Perhaps the best examples of such texts include the *Vaipulya sūtras* (such as the MVS), which Chandra claims certainly are of Iranian origin.³⁵ The internal use of the word *gāthā*, used repeatedly throughout the MVS (instead of *sūtra*), supports Chandra's argument,³⁶ as *gāthā* is a very common term in the Zoroastrian canon and, in fact, is the term given to refer to the oldest collection of verses in the Avesta.

Richard Salomon's study of Kharoṣṭhi manuscripts underscores the importance of another Inner Asian region, Gandhāra, in the production of Buddhist texts. He writes, "Even before the discovery of the new Kharoṣṭhi manuscripts, there was no doubt that Gandhāra had been an important center of Buddhist scholarship at various periods."³⁷ The Gandhāran fragments studied by Salomon were written in Kharoṣṭhi, which is an adaptation of the Aramaic script used by the Achaemenian Empire of ancient Iran. Given the textual connections, it is also probable that *homa* scenes depicted on Gandhāran temples³⁸ and on Sassanian and Kushano-Sassanian coinage³⁹ were influenced by those found on Aramaic plates in Persepolis.

³⁴ For further discussion of this point, see Gibson (1997), pg. 40 and Snellgrove (1987), pg. 266-267.

³⁵ A point made in his introduction to the translation of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* (in Yamamoto, 1990 pg. x) and in another essay (in Ligeti, 1984, pg. 99).

³⁶ For example, almost every chapter of the MVS contains statements such as: "Bhagavān preached the following *gāthā*" (Yamamoto, pg. 162) and "Then Bhagavān preached *gāthās* as follows" (pg. 78).

³⁷ Salomon (1999), pg. 178.

³⁸ Verardi points out that the Gandhāran *homa* scenes demonstrate both Vedic and Iranian influences. For example, there are ladles 'similar to the Vedic type', but the scenes also have clear Graeco-Iranian elements. The fire stands, which were mainly used for *homa*, look similar to the Persian style, but are "indianized" by the addition of lotus petals (Verardi, 1994, pg. 28).

³⁹ This coinage, on which *homa* rites are frequently represented, is exhaustively catalogued in Göbl (1984).

Tibetan texts containing ritual prescriptions for *homa* have also long been assumed to have an Indic origin. However, like most *tantras*, they originated for the most part in Inner Asian regions. Based upon internal textual references, Siklos locates the origin of the *Vajramahābhairava Tantra* (along with all the *Yamāntaka tantras*) in Oddiyāna, most likely located in the Swāt Valley, “in an Iranian-dominated region.”⁴⁰ Indian elements still characterize much of the material, as Indian culture has always had significant influence in the region. Siklos, for example, argues that the Śaiva influence in these Buddhist *tantras* is indicative of the extensive contact between the Iranian regions and North India during the text’s composition. Moreover, the transmission of texts to Tibet most often occurred via a route through Bihar.⁴¹ This would explain why many of the texts of so-called ‘Indic’ origin were transmitted via Nālandā, located in close proximity to Kathmandu.

It is not particularly surprising that the Chinese pilgrims and Tibetan translators claim an Indic origin to the texts they retrieved and translated. Davidson convincingly argues that in China and Tibet, texts or teachings of Indic origin were automatically seen as authoritative. Gibson concurs that Indic origin often was attributed to texts and teachers because “scriptural authenticity was deemed identical with Indian provenance.”⁴² Strickmann further points out that, in many cases, texts authored in China were also accredited with being translations from Sanskrit originals. He writes, “Some of the most influential scriptures in the Chinese

⁴⁰ Siklos (1996), pg. 5. Siklos posits that the text was likely composed in the eighth century.

⁴¹ Ibid, pg. 10.

⁴² Gibson (1997), pg. 47.

Buddhist canon were actually written in China, and directly in Chinese—even though, in accordance with the basic criterion of authenticity for Chinese Buddhist texts, they claim to be translations from Sanskrit.”⁴³

Even assuming the ‘Indian’ origin of Sanskrit texts based solely upon the fact that they originally were composed in Kashmir is problematic. In modern times as well as ancient, Kashmir has been anything but culturally homogenous and, given its location, has continually served as a bridge between various regions including Iran, Tibet and India. In his study of *tantra* in Tibet, Geoffrey Samuel has recently qualified the designation ‘Indic region’ as needing to include much of Southeast and Central Asia. He argues that when discussing Indic cultural regions, we are “not dealing with a relatively homogenous ‘Indian’ cultural sphere, but with a number of cultural models and patterns which were expanding outwards from what is now northern India and Pakistan into a much wider region.”⁴⁴ Thus, it should be expected that Buddhist *tantras*, including ritual prescriptions, contain a considerable Central Asian influence.

Hindu *tantric* literature overwhelmingly was composed in Kashmir regions as well. The *Pāñcarātra Ahirbudhnya Saṃhitā*, a Vaiṣṇava *tantric* text, almost certainly originated in Kashmir⁴⁵ as did the *Śaivāgamas* upon which the *Siddhānta* practice is primarily based. According to Sanderson, the great majority of surviving Śaiva exegetical texts were produced by Kashmirian Brahmins during the tenth and

⁴³ Strickmann (2002), pg. 58.

⁴⁴ Samuel (2005), pg. 96.

⁴⁵ Schrader (1916), pg. 96-97.

eleventh centuries.⁴⁶ He further argues that the works of Abhinavagupta, one of the most renowned Kashmiri Śaiva authors, should “not be understood on its own but only in relation to an independent understanding of various traditions which he was drawing together into his work.”⁴⁷ He focuses primarily on the acceptance and inclusion other Indian systems, such as Śākta and Brahmanical, to point out that the Kashmirian commentators often de-emphasized the practices used to attain supernatural powers (*siddhiḥ*) in favor of “formulating their metaphysical doctrines and to defending them against those of their opponents in the shared language of Indian Philosophical argument.”⁴⁸ However, since we know that contact between Kashmir and Central Asia was quite extensive during this time, it would be naïve to assume that Kashmirian texts were authored in a specifically ‘Indian’ frame of reference. Abhinavagupta’s writings, in fact, demonstrate interesting parallels to the philosophical treatises being composed in Iran around the same time period.⁴⁹

Finally, there is the issue of dating texts. Gibson, citing Newman and Nakamura, makes the point that, in many cases, Buddhist esoteric literature pre-

⁴⁶ Sanderson (2007), pg. 231.

⁴⁷ Sanderson (2006), pg. 144.

⁴⁸ Sanderson (2007), pg. 241.

⁴⁹ Islamic philosophy in Persia was thriving during this time period. Some of the similar concepts found in the ninth and tenth century Islamic philosophical works (in Arabic and Persian) and in the Śaivism propounded by Abhinavagupta include the theory of Recognition, Illuminationism, Divine Unity, and self annihilation. Chittick, for example, argues that early Islamic Peripatetic philosophers (such as Avicenna) argued that human intellect could be clouded and that man could only attain ultimate truth with “a personal, intimate and direct knowledge resulting from the removal of some or all of the veils separating man from God . . . They called this knowledge by such names as ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*), ‘direct vision’ (*shuhūd*), ‘contemplation’ (*mushāhadah*) and ‘direct tasting’ (*dhawq*)” (Chittick 1981, pg. 89). Similarities alone do not establish lines of transmission and some argue that much of the theory found in Islamic treatises is appropriated from Greek Philosophy (Plato and Aristotle). Others argue that the Indian Upanishads influenced Plato’s theories of anamnesis and so forth. The important point here is that the existence of ‘trans-local’ trends offers further evidence for significant contact and exchange during this period.

exists Hindu *tantras*. The oldest Buddhist *tantra* seems to be the *Guhyasamaja tantra*, perhaps composed as early as fourth century CE, although some claim that the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* may have been up to two hundred years earlier.⁵⁰ In attempting to date the *Śaivāgamas*, Dyczkowski argues that the earliest reference to the manuscripts cannot be dated before the seventh century and that, based on this dating, “it seems that the *Śaivāgamas* proliferated to an astonishing degree at an extremely rapid rate so that by the time we reach Abhinavagupta and his immediate predecessors who lived in ninth-century Kashmir we discover in their works references drawn from a vast corpus of *Śaivāgamic* literature.”⁵¹ However, Sanderson has recently argued, based upon inscriptions and references from contemporaneous texts, that Tantric *Śaivism* “of a public and strongly soteriological variety” and, by extension, Tantric *Śaiva* scriptures, were “well established” in Kashmir by the seventh century.⁵²

Therefore dating, especially in regards to Indian texts, is problematic at best. Nonetheless, evidence supports the case that Buddhist *tantras* may well predate (or at least not postdate) their Hindu counterparts. This is commensurate with the dating of specific references to *homa* as an individualized liturgy. *Homa*, including its basic prescriptions and categorization, was well established in Buddhist texts before it comes to be widespread in Hindu *tantric* literature.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Bhattacharyya, 1964, pg. 62.

⁵¹ Dyczkowski, 1987, pg. 5.

⁵² Sanderson (2006), pg. 149. Sanderson further nuances his study of Kashmir *Śaiva* systems by differentiating between two major divisions of the *Śivaśāsana*, the *Pāñcārthika* and the *Āgamic*. One distinguishing feature between the two is that *Pāñcārthika* practice, largely ascetic based, is fireless while exoteric *homa* sacrifices are central to *Āgamic* practice (pg. 147).

Homa Nomenclature

If the majority of *tantric* texts were composed within a medieval Indo-Iranian milieu, then it would make sense that the nomenclature employed would differ significantly from Vedic literature. It has already been established that, although *homa* allegedly originated in the Vedic context, the earliest Vedic texts make almost no mention of the term *homa* and certainly not as an individualized liturgy. Several other terms associated with *homa*, quite prolific in *tantric* literature, likewise are either nonexistent or rarely employed in Vedic texts. Some of these terms include *havana* (used as a synonym for *homa*), *kuṇḍa* (the fire-pit utilized for *homa* rites), *sarṣapa* (mustard seeds burned in *homa* rites), and *mantric* words recited in *homa* rites (such as *huṃ*, *hṛṃ*, and *phaṭ*). The etymology of all these terms cannot be established here, and, given the incredible loss of early Iranian texts, may be impossible. It is important to note, however, that at least some of the terms can be traced to the Iranian context.

As a first example, *havana* continues to be a widespread term used in India today to refer to *homa* rites, but it did not become common the Sanskrit nomenclature until at least the medieval period. *Havana* presumably represents a nominal derivation of the root *hu* ('to offer'). However, like the optative verb *homayet* (derived from the denominative *homaya*⁵³ which, in turn, must be derived

⁵³ The nominal form *homaya* does not occur in Vedic literature, but is employed in the Avesta; cf. Yasna 27:7.

from *homa*), seems to be a common derivation only in *tantric* literature.⁵⁴ The only early usages of *havana* that I could locate occur in the BaudhŚS (in four instances) and in the Mahābhārata only once. In the BaudhŚS instances, *havana* simply refers to the offering of milk within other rites, such as the *agnihotra*.⁵⁵ And in MBh, it occurs in the compound *havanānte*, translated as ‘at the end of the offering.’⁵⁶ Monier Williams defines *havana* both as a masculine noun, meaning ‘fire’ or ‘a fire-receptacle’ (citing only ‘Lexicographers’ as a witness) and as a neuter noun, defined as ‘the act of offering an oblation with fire, sacrifice’ (citing only MBh. and Hariv. as sources).⁵⁷ Thus, even if Vedic references to *havana* can be found, the term was, at best, rarely employed.⁵⁸

In contrast, there exist multiple *havana* references in the Avesta and Middle Persian literature. Here, *havana* (sometimes *hâvan* or *hâvanī*) represents a *yazad* (‘one worthy of worship’ or a ‘lord of the ritual order’) who presides over the second watch of the day. A similar usage, *Hawan* the *yazad* (who presides over the time from sunrise to midday) is invoked as a possessor of righteousness, ‘Ashavan,’ to whom an entire prayer is dedicated.⁵⁹ Even more often, however, *hâvana*⁶⁰ refers to

⁵⁴ It also is interesting to note that, in regard to tantric texts, *homayet* almost exclusively is translated as ‘should sacrifice’ and not ‘should offer,’ just as *homa* is translated as a fire ‘sacrifice’ while in the Vedic context solely translated as offering or oblation.

⁵⁵ See, for example, BaudhŚS 20.20.5 (Kashikar, 2003, pg. 1363).

⁵⁶ van Buitenen (1973), pg. 318.

⁵⁷ Monier-Williams, pg. 1293.

⁵⁸ *Āhuti*, another synonym for *homa* identified by Helene Brunner in the *Somaśambhupaddhati*, also could be related to the Avestan *āzūiti*, employed in relation to *haoma* and usually referring to libations into the fire. However, unlike *havana*, *āhuti* is attested in the early Vedic *Samhitās*.

⁵⁹ Darmesteter, et. al. (Khorda Avesta), pg. 12. Also propitiated in this prayer are Ashavans Savanghi and Visya, Mithra (“of wide pastures, with a thousand ears, ten thousand eyes”), Raman Khwastra, the holy Fravashis, Haurvatat.

the mortar (made of stone, iron, or wood) used to crush *haoma* [cf. Yasna 22:2, 22:21, 24:2, 24:7, 25:2, 27:7, 62:2]. This latter usage seems to be quite ancient, as it was written on the Aramaic inscriptions discovered in Persepolis.⁶¹ The prior usage, *Havana* as a *yazad*, perhaps accounts for the use of *Havana* as one of the fire deities ‘born in succession from Abhimānin Agni’ in the Chinese translation of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*.⁶²

A second example of new *tantric* terminology can be found in the term *kuṇḍa*, the name given to the fire hearth into which substances of *homa* are deposited. *Kuṇḍa* is a very widespread term in both Hindu and Buddhist *tantras* and always refers to the fire-pit. However, once again, it rarely occurs in Vedic literature. Bloomfield’s Vedic Concordance contains no entry for *kuṇḍa* and it seems there are no references in the *Samhitās* or *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa*. When it does appear in early Sanskrit texts, it never seems to be translated as fire-pit or hearth but, rather, as a bowl or vessel. For example, the only usage of *kuṇḍa* in the *Śrautasūtras* can be found in Praśna XVII of the BaudŚS (verses 20-23), as part of the *Kuṇḍapāyinām Ayana*, or ‘bowl’ ceremony.⁶³ Likewise, all the *kuṇḍa* references in the Mahābhārata are translated as ‘pots’ or ‘wells’. For example, there are one hundred *kuṇḍa* pots

⁶⁰ Perhaps equivalent to Skt. *savanna* or *sāvana*. Though Samuel Oliphant (1920) argues that ‘the denotation is very different in the two languages’ (pg. 225).

⁶¹ Dandamaev (1989), pg. 334.

⁶² Hodge (2003), pg. 381; Atharvan is also listed here as another fire deity.

⁶³ The translation of these verses is “Now the bowls. Since all of them have studied three Vedas, they possess a bowl. Since they cause each other to sacrifice moving along towards, they possess a bowl. Since they consume Soma with goblets without handles, they possess a bowl.” (Kashikar, 2003, pg. 1101).

filled with ghee,⁶⁴ the ‘wells (*kuṇḍa*) of the seven seers’ (*saptarṣikuṇḍeṣu*),⁶⁵ the ‘wells of the breast’ (*stanakuṇḍa*),⁶⁶ and the ‘golden basin’ (*kāñcana kuṇḍa*).⁶⁷ Therefore, the pre-*tantric* usages of *kuṇḍa* indicate that the term designated a bowl, well, or basin. Only in the *tantras* does it become a common term for a fire pit, both in the compound *homakuṇḍa* as well as *kuṇḍa* by itself.⁶⁸

Although it does not designate fire-pit, Kunda and Kundī do appear in the Avestan and later Pahlavi Zoroastrian literature.⁶⁹ Here, Kunda most often refers to the demon (*drūj*) of intoxication, who is ‘drunken without drinking.’⁷⁰ In the later *Bundahišn*, Kunda is the “steed that carries sorcerers (*kunda dīv an ī bâra-ī yâtûan*)”⁷¹ or “he who is the steed (*barak*) of wizards.”⁷² Similarly, Kundi refers to a particular demonic being whom priests must drive away during the process of purifying ritual implements.⁷³ Kundī, however, also is the Gujarati term used by Zoroastrians to designate the water vessel in the daily Yasna liturgy.⁷⁴

Thus, the *druj* Kunda (or Kundī) initially seems to not be directly related to *kuṇḍa* as fire-pit in the *tantras* or even to *kuṇḍa* or *kundī* as water vessel. However,

⁶⁴ MBh 1:107:21, transl. Van Buitenen, pg. 244.

⁶⁵ MBh 3:81:59, transl. Van Buitenen, pg. 381.

⁶⁶ MBh 3:82:131, transl. Van Buitenen, pg. 392.

⁶⁷ MBh 3:214:12, transl. Van Buitenen, pg. 650.

⁶⁸ In the *Somaśambhupaddhati*, for example, *kuṇḍa* by itself is used to refer to the fire pit in numerous rites, such as the *śivaliṅgapraṭiṣṭhāvidhiḥ* (installation of the *śiva liṅga*; Brunner, Vol. 4, pg. 76-79), *samayadīkṣāvidhiḥ* (‘regular’ initiation rites; Brunner, Vol. 3, pg. 12-13), etc., as well as in the threefold classification of *homa* (*śāntika*, *puṣṭika*, *abhicāra*; Brunner, Vol. 4, pg. 28-29).

⁶⁹ Cited by Jackson (1923), pg. 24.

⁷⁰ Vendidad 19.41. All Vendidad translations from Darmesteter (1897).

⁷¹ Gbd, 27.50. All Greater Bundahišn translations by Anklesaria (1956).

⁷² Bd. 28.39. Bundahišn (according to West’s translation).

⁷³ cf. Vendidad 11.9, 11.12

⁷⁴ Since *kundi* as water vessel is not attested in extant Avestan scriptures, it is difficult to know whether or not the Gujarati term originated from Iranian or Indian sources.

the term *kumbha*, a common synonym for *kuṇḍa* used throughout Vedic literature, may help shed some light on the connection between Kunda the Avestan *drūj* and *kuṇḍa* the *tantric* fire pit.

Kumbha, meaning ‘jar, pot, pitcher’ carries the same meaning in Sanskrit as the original meaning of *kuṇḍa* in the Vedic literature.⁷⁵ In the Avestan sources, the alternative spelling *khumba* also carries the meaning of water pot or jar.⁷⁶ In both contexts, the word carries a demonological sense as well. In the Avesta, the demon Fradhakhshti is called ‘son of Khumba’ “because they had brought him up in a jar”⁷⁷ and Khumbya in earlier literature also refers to a ‘jar demon’ (*yašt* 138).⁷⁸ In the AVŚ, the *kumbhamuśka* (lit. ‘having jar shaped testicles’) represents a group of demons as do the *kumbhāṇḍa* in early Buddhist sources, including in the Bower Manuscript.

In his discussion of the Akkadian giant, Humbaba, David Napier connects Humbaba with the ‘fundamental Indo-Iranian concept,’ *kumbha*. Though the literal meaning of *kumbha* is jar or water pot, “metaphorically, it may also designate a pot that contains something sacred (e.g., *soma*, a demon or god), an embryonic container (i.e., a womb), or a round object that suggests containment and fertility.”⁷⁹ Bowls in

⁷⁵ Mayrhofer (1956) offers *kumbha* as a synonym for *kuṇḍa* but, interestingly, only under the definition of *kuṇḍa* as ‘the son of a woman by another man than her husband.’ This, however, shows double entendre of *kuṇḍa/kumbha* as both water vessel and womb. Various etymological origins have been given for *kumbha* including tracing it to the Indo-Iranian *xumba* (Stertavant, 1941, pg. 10), and to the ancient IE *kūpa*—hole or pit (Pokorny, 1959, pg. 591).

⁷⁶ In context, for example, of ‘a cloud for a jar’ (Bd 7.11).

⁷⁷ The justification given for brining him up in a jar is “owing to the fear of Aeshma” (Bd 29.5).

⁷⁸ Reference cited in Napier (1986), pg. 132.

⁷⁹ Napier (1986), pg. 132.

general have long been used apotropaically (for example, in Aramaic inscriptions found in Mesopotamia), with the belief that the bowl entraps and thus combats evil powers.⁸⁰ Napier identifies the *kumbha* bowl with Humbaba as follows:

It is the imagery of sacrifice and containment that connects the monster Humbaba with the Sanskrit world for ‘bowl,’ providing a container, a boundary, within which the demon is manifested; for like the contained entrails that displayed the face of Humbaba, the Sanskrit term is also used—especially as it concerns the worship of Durgā—to distinguish the horrific image contained in a bowl . . . the significance of the word *kumbha* rests, then, not only in the fact that it is part of both sacrifice and containment, but also in the fact that it is apotropaic and that it has everything to do with both the forehead and sexuality. From the function of Humbaba as a demon of bad birth, to the iconography of the superciliary mark, the word *kumbha* incorporates both the idea of delineating and protecting sacred space and that of the cycles of sexuality and birth, of death and revivification.⁸¹

Thus, the connection between Kunda/Kundī, the demon (*drūj*), and *kuṇḍa/kuṇḍī*, the water jar that contains demons, becomes clearer. The *tantric kuṇḍa* serves to similarly circumvent a boundary within which evil can be combated and, thus, could logically be connected to the Iranian demon Kunda.

Finally, it has been well established that *mantras* in *tantric* literature differ in many significant ways from Vedic *mantras*.⁸² The *astra* (weapon) *mantra*⁸³ represents one of the most widespread in both Hindu and Buddhist *tantras*. *Astra* itself likely is a Central Asian loan word, being found both in AVŚ (11.16.16) and in

⁸⁰ Shaked (1985).

⁸¹ Napier (1986), pg. 134.

⁸² See, for example, Wheelock (1989).

⁸³ The Tārā Vidyā *astra mantra*, for example, is *hrīm strīm hūm phaṭ* (White 2000, pg 484). Various forms of the *astra mantra*, however, are found through Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* literature and sometimes *phaṭ* itself is considered the *astra mantra* (Bühnemann 2000, pg. 42).

the Avesta to designate the ‘weapon’ or ‘whip.’ In Zoroastrian sources, the *astra* can be wielded by the enemy, who fraudulently poses as an Atharvan, or by the true Atharvan. For example, the Vendidad describes, “He wields a wrong Ashtra mairya and he has not girded his loins with the Religion; when he says, ‘I am an Athravan,; he lies; do not call him an Athravan, O holy Zarathushtra!’ thus said Ahura Mazda.”⁸⁴ Elsewhere, *astra* is listed along with a mouth-veil (*paitidâna*), staff (*khrafastraghna*), strainer, mortar, *haoma* cups, *barsom*, etc., as one of the implements utilized by the fire priest (*atharvan or athaurune*).⁸⁵

Individual *mantric* words recited in *tantric homa* performances include *hum* (*hun*), *hṛm*, and *phaṭ*; none of which are common in *śrauta* liturgies. *Hṛm*, which likely occurs in Buddhist *tantras* before being found in Hindu texts,⁸⁶ may be connected to an old Hebrew root for ‘sacrifice’⁸⁷ or to ‘ban, curse,’⁸⁸ though admittedly there seems to be no mention of it in Zoroastrian usage. Regarding *hūm*, the evidence for Iranian origin is a bit more convincing, though still uncertain at best. Chatterji argues that *hum* (*hun*), used ‘for arousing serpent power,’ was adopted by the *Śaivas* from a central Avestan *mantra*.⁸⁹ Although he does not cite specific passages, presumably he is connecting *hun* to *Ahunavar* (*Ahuna Vairya*), the main

⁸⁴Vendidad 18.4.

⁸⁵ Vendidad 14.8.

⁸⁶ Bühnemann (“Buddhist Deities,” 2000); In this article, Bühnemann argues for some influence in Hindu *tantras* from Buddhist *tantras*, though she rejects as an overstatement Bhattacharyya’s argument that the Buddhists were the first to write *tantric* texts.

⁸⁷ Janzen (2004), pg. 164.

⁸⁸ Schwartz (1985), pg. 493.

⁸⁹ Chatterji (1967), pg. xxxviii.

mantra recited in Zoroastrian rituals.⁹⁰ However, there is too little evidence to argue for either the Iranian or Vedic origin of individual *mantric* words found in *tantric* sources. There seem to be *tantric* specific developments, attested in both Buddhist and Hindu *tantras* that either were appropriated from a common source or developed within a common milieu.

Bhattacharyya argues that many of the *mantras* evolve first in the Buddhist *tantras* before entering the Hindu *tantric* literature:

The evolution of the Tāntric mantra can be traced thus through its successive stages in the Buddhist literature. When, however, we turn our attention to Hindu literature, we are surprised to find that the Tāntric mantras suddenly make their entry into it without showing even a faint trace of the earlier and cruder stages of development. This seems to be a sufficient reason for believing the Hindu māntric system to be later than Vajrayāna, and for holding that the mantras were incorporated into Hinduism bodily from Buddhism.⁹¹

Bühnemann agrees with some aspects of Bhattacharyya. Specifically, she discusses his argument that the Buddhist version of the *Bhūtaḍāmaratantra* (BT) predates the Hindu version (by about four centuries) and cites at least two instances of borrowing. Specifically, the Hindu BT appropriates the *mantras* of a group of *yoginīs* and the *mantra* of the “king of the Krodhas” (*krodharāja*) from the Buddhist BT.⁹²

Therefore, though the evolution of *tantric mantras* is still up for debate, it is clear that medieval literature employed new nomenclature in relation to *homa* rites—

⁹⁰ The nominal form of *ahu*, *ahum*, occurs in this mantra.

⁹¹ Bhattacharyya (1964), pg. 56.

⁹² The *mantra* reads: *om vajravālena hana hana sarvabhūtān hūm phaṭ* (“*Om*, with the diamond flame kill, kill all beings [*bhūta*], *hūm phaṭ*”) in the Hindu BT and is exactly the same in the Buddhist BT except instead of *vajravālena* it reads *vajrajvāle* (Bühnemann, 2000, pg. 41-42). The Buddhist translation, then, would instead convey the meaning of ‘in the *vajra* flame’).

nomenclature rarely found in Vedic sources. Many of these new terms are can be found in Zoroastrian literature and, thus, were likely Central Asian loanwords.

Homa Fires

Various prescriptions related to the ritual fires and fire hearths also demonstrate stark differences between the Vedic and *tantric* forms of sacrifice. Not only do the descriptions of the fires themselves differ, but also the shapes, construction, and functions of the fire hearth itself reveal significant dissonance. Once again, many of the *tantric* elements associated with *homa* fires have precedence in the Central Asian and Zoroastrian ritual complex.

First, the three fires of Vedic sacrifices, namely, the *gārhapatya*, the *āhavanīya*, and the *dakṣiṇa* are well known.⁹³ The three fires are employed in most *śrauta* rites, including more simplistic rites such as the *agnihotrahoma*.⁹⁴ Even in contemporary *homa* sequences in Brahmanical practice, oblations are offered into each of the three fires.⁹⁵

The Vedic threefold division of fires is basically unknown in *tantric* texts. *Tantric homa* rites, rather, focus on a single fire. However, there are multiple fires possible in *tantric* rites. The various fires are distinguished from one another based on particular qualities, such as the ‘tongues’ of the flames, the color of the fire, the

⁹³ However, as Knipe (1972) demonstrates, besides the triadic division, there also exist references to the five fires in Vedic literature.

⁹⁴ Dandekar (1958), pg. 85.

⁹⁵ See Tachikawa (1993).

sounds made, and the type of smoke emitted.⁹⁶ The *tantric* descriptions of ritual fires have no obvious connection to the Vedic paradigm. Though Zoroastrian sources generally identify three main fires, agreeing with the Vedic schema, multiple other fires are also described. For example, the production of the most sacred of the three fires, the *Ātaš Bahrām*, requires the unifying of sixteen different kinds of fires, including fires in which dead matter, impure liquid, and dung have been burnt.⁹⁷

Next, the three Vedic fires are arrayed around the altar (*vedī*), located at the center of the ritual area. In contrast, *tantric homa* fires are kindled in a *kuṇḍa*, a pit dug in the ground, with a single fire serving as the focal point of any given rite. The shape of the *kuṇḍa* varies according to the type of *homa* being performed. Most *tantric* descriptions of *homa*, both Buddhist and Hindu, refer to three basic shapes: round, square, and triangular, though sometimes a crescent shaped *kuṇḍa* is included. Buddhist *tantras* consistently prescribe the round *kuṇḍa* for *śāntika homa*, square for *pauṣṭika homa*, and triangular for *abhicāra homa*. Hindu *tantric* sources prescribe the same *kuṇḍa* shapes, but in relation to the six magical rites (*ṣaṭkarmāṇi*).⁹⁸ Rather than establishing an abstract, geometrical connection with the macrocosm (as in the

⁹⁶ Bühnemann ('Iconography,' 2000); *Śāradā-Tilaka Tantram* (1988), pg. 57-59 and 68-69; Giebel (2005), pg. 213-216. Two of many examples from the STT are #161 "The smoke having the colour of buds and moon is good. Black smoke may kill the Yajamāna," and #162 "The fire sounding like crow destroys the country soon and if it like donkey destroys everything."

⁹⁷ Vitalone (2004), pg. 427-429.

⁹⁸ See Bühnemann ("Six Rites," 2000).

case of the shapes of the *vedī*⁹⁹) the shape of the fire hearth in *homa* rites is associated with helping effect the respective purpose of the rite.¹⁰⁰

Though square, circular and semicircular fire hearths¹⁰¹ are referenced in Vedic literature,¹⁰² the triangular shape is almost entirely unknown. The only mention of triangle shape in the Śathapatha Brahmana is found in the footnotes and refers not to a fire pit, but to the enclosing sticks.¹⁰³ The Yajur Veda also makes one interesting reference to a triangular altar, but it is ‘piled up’ (not dug); and constructed within the context of a bird shaped hearth. Specifically, Yajur Veda prescribes that one should:

Pile [bricks] in the form of an Alaja bird, with four furrows, who desires support; there are four quarters; verily he finds support in the quarters. He should pile in the form of a triangle, who has foes [1]; verily he repels his foes. He should pile in triangle form on both sides,

⁹⁹ Such as the bird-shaped or isosceles trapezoid *vedīs* (Cf. Staal, 1983, 1999, and Knipe 1986).

¹⁰⁰ Certain medieval texts list multiple other shapes of *kuṇḍa*, though not necessarily in conjunction with *homa* particularly. The *Śāradātilaka* lists multiple hearth shapes including the *yonikuṇḍa*, *ardha-chandra-kuṇḍa*, *tryasra kuṇḍa* (triangle), *vr̥tta kuṇḍa*, *ṣaḍasra radium kuṇḍam*, *padma kuṇḍa*, and *aṣṭāsrakuṇḍam* (*Śāradātilaka*, pg. 32-37). Likewise, the *Mayamatam* (a Śaivasiddhānta architectural treatise) details various shapes of *kuṇḍa* to be built in sacrificial pavilions including “in the shape of a square, a vulva, a semicircle, a triangle, a circle, a hexagon, a lotus and an octagon” (25:42). [*Kṛtvaikāśītibhāgān niśitavipuladhirmaṇḍapābhyaṇtaram tanmadhye vedī navāṃśā bhavati hi paritāstrīṇi bhāgāni madhye. Āsraṃ yonyardhacandraṃ guṇabhujamaparam vai suvṛttam ṣaḍāśram padmam vasvaśrakunṣam surapatibhavanādikrameṇaiva kuryāt.*] The subsequent verses (43-56) detail the specific prescriptions for each *kuṇḍa* shape. (Dagens, 1994, pg. 461).

¹⁰¹ Seidenberg argues that the square and circular hearths are “in all likelihood Indo-European” in origin (in Staal, 1983, pg. 128).

¹⁰² The *ahavaniya* is square, *garhapatya* is round, and *daksina* is semicircular in Vedic *śrauta* rites. Although the shapes do have symbolic meaning (for example, the round *garhapatya* has been explained as representing the earth, also said to be the womb, thus “representing the earthly foundation of man and the fire altar, both of which will be [ritually] born during the course of the Agnicayana’s performance”), the bulk of the ŚB prescriptions pertain to the construction of the altar and not the fire hearths (Tull, 1989, pg. 89). Moreover, descriptions of the three Vedic hearths differ significantly from the *tantric kuṇḍa* prescriptions in that the shape of the hearth itself is not credited with bringing about the ritual effect.

¹⁰³ Part IV, 9th kanda (fourth Adhyaya) fourth Brahmana, FN 250:2 (Eggeling)

who desires, 'May I repel the foes I have and those I shall have'; verily he repels the foes he has and those he will have.¹⁰⁴

It is interesting that the triangular shape here corresponds to repelling foes, but this brief reference does not seem to closely correspond with the *tantric kuṇḍa* prescriptions of triangular, square, and circular hearths.

Although archaeological evidence suggests that ancient Iranian altars were constructed as towers (rather than dug into the ground), the triadic formulation of fire altar shapes (i.e. square, circular, triangular) does have some precedence in ancient Iranian rites. Rawlinson claims that the Assyrians utilized three basic fire hearth shapes: the circular, triangular and square¹⁰⁵ and Sommerville refers to a fire altar with a triangular top on a Babylonian cylinder.¹⁰⁶ This data may be too scanty to provide a direct connection between the shapes of Iranian altars and *tantric kuṇḍas* but the evidence for Vedic origin is at least equally as dubious. The triangular shape, rather, is likely a uniquely medieval development.

The incorporation of a *maṇḍala* within the center of the fire hearth represents another essential difference between the Vedic *vedī* and the *tantric kuṇḍa*. Some scholars have tried to establish the Vedic origin of *maṇḍalas*, based primarily upon early interest in geometric designs. Bühnemann, however, argues against this proposition and identifies the first Hindu *maṇḍala* as the sixth century

¹⁰⁴ YV V.4.11. Translation by Keith (1967), pg. 438.

¹⁰⁵ Rawlinson (1885), pg. 36-37.

¹⁰⁶ Sommerville (1887), pg. 757.

vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala described in the *Bṛhatsamhitā*.¹⁰⁷ However, Inden has identified several near eastern influences in even this text.¹⁰⁸ Regardless, it is difficult to argue for a Vedic origin of the *tantric maṇḍala*. As an alternative, Gibson and others have argued for the Central Asian origin of the *maṇḍala*. He writes:

The Vajrayāna *maṇḍala* is also often held to be an Indic creation. In a little-remarked article now forty years old, however, Cammann demonstrated the artistic dependence of Tibetan *maṇḍalas* on cosmic mirrors from the Han Dynasty (fragments of which were found by Aurel Stein in Inner Asia), casting significant doubt on the assumption of these *maṇḍala*'s Indic provenance; Conze has concluded based on this evidence that 'the peculiar Buddhist arrangement of *maṇḍalas* seems to have developed in Central Asia'. What appears to be the earliest literary references to a fourfold Buddhist *maṇḍala* is found in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsūtra* belonging to the Vaipulya group whose possible association with the Indo-Iranian 'contact zone' has already been mentioned. The *sūtra*'s history in India is largely unknown, but it was first translated into Chinese during the Liang Dynasty (502-586), and it remained extremely popular throughout Inner Asia, being translated into Khotanese and Sogdian, and, later, Tibetan, Uighur, Hsi Hsia, and Mongolian. Thus, it cannot be argued that Inner Asians were not conversant with literary maṇḍalic symbolism in its earliest detectable stages, and there is no proof that it was widespread in India any earlier than in Inner Asia.¹⁰⁹

The *vajradhātu maṇḍala*, quite popular in East Asian Buddhism, is practically unknown in India.¹¹⁰ The word *vajra* itself is an Iranian loan word, corresponding to the Avestan *vazra*—the main weapon of Mithra.

¹⁰⁷ Bühnemann (2003), pg. 27.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Inden (1992).

¹⁰⁹ Gibson (1997), pg. 41.

¹¹⁰ Van Gulik (1980), pg. 56.

Moreover, Parpola argues that the *maṇḍala* formations of the Vajrayāna type can be found in the groundplans of ancient fortresses of the Iranian region as well as on several BMAC seals. He explains this as follows:

The groundplan of the modern Afghan *qalas* and the similar BMAC manors is usually square. Two remarkable monumental buildings of the BMAC having a square groundplan are the ‘fortress’ of Sapallitepa in northern Bactria (Fig. 11) and the ‘palace of Dashly-3 in southern Bactria (Fig. 12). As first noted by Burkhard Brentjes (1981: 26), the groundplan of these buildings with their T-shaped corridors in each cardinal direction bears a striking resemblance to the Tantric *maṇḍala* (Fig. 13).¹¹¹

Thus, the origin of *tantric maṇḍala* formations and symbolism can be more accurately traced to the Central Asian, rather than Vedic, context.

In short, the use of multiple fires, the shapes of fire altars, and the *maṇḍala* formations associated with fire hearths all represent *tantric* developments that correspond more closely to Central Asian ritual complexes than to a Vedic one.

Homa Substances

Just as the *tantric* fire hearth diverges significantly from its presumed Vedic precursor, the substances offered in *tantric homa* rites also do not originate in Vedic sources. Oblations offered in Vedic rites consist primarily of ghee, milk, grains, and cakes. Although *homa* rites also include these, many other substances are employed including mustard seeds, sesame seeds, flowers, fruits, and transgressive materials

¹¹¹ Parpola (2002), pg. 263.

such as poison, blood, intoxicants, and feces. The efficacy associated with these substances also differs from Vedic conceptions.

First, though rules and substances are prescribed in the various Vedic rites, the sacrificial result does not seem directly related to the substances themselves. Rather, rewards associated with Vedic sacrifices result from proper execution of all the rules. The substances, in many ways, seem to be of secondary importance. In contrast, the rewards sought in *tantric* fire sacrifice depend largely upon the substances burned in the various *homas*. The *Śāradātilaka*, an eleventh century *tantric* treatise compiled from several sources, demonstrates the extensiveness of the variety of substances employed and subsequent results achieved in *homa* rites. For example, by performing sugarcane *homa* one achieves a higher status. By blue lotus *homa*, one attracts the queen. Mustard seeds results in the destruction of enemies, and by pepper *homa*, the enemy “will die definitely.” With the performance of *akṣa homa* (*vibhitaka* fruits), the enemy becomes mad, and verse 61 claims that “One can arise enmity even between the two close friends by the Homa of balls of cow dung.”¹¹² Thus, the chosen substance clearly is connected with ritual efficacy.

Next, with the possible exception of *soma*, Vedic sacrifices do not employ the burning of transgressive or poisonous substances (even *soma* is not generally poured into the fire). In contrast, *tantric homa* rites prescribe a variety of transgressive, often toxic, substances to be offered into the ritual fire. For example,

¹¹² STT, pg. 126. Multiple lists of the various *homas* and their results are given throughout the text, particularly 9th Paṭala (109-112), 10th Paṭala (113- 121), 11th Paṭala (122-129), 12th Paṭala (133-141), 13th Paṭala (148-149).

homa rites making use of the powerful hallucinogen, *dhattura* (also a rich source of numerous medicines¹¹³), seem to have been quite common in Tibet.¹¹⁴ *Dhattura* grows wild in the Central Asian regions of Iran, though it is not mentioned in the Vedic literature. Siklos analyzes the uses of *dhattura* as prescribed in the *Vajramahābhairava Tantra* and argues against the rather wild assertion, proposed by some botanical theorists, that it was introduced to Tibet from the Americas. He also argues that the word *dhattura* originates in Central Asia and is not a Dravidian loan word.¹¹⁵

The use of hallucinogenic substances in *homa* resonates with the psychedelic properties originally associated with *haoma* and *soma* in the Avesta and Ṛg Veda. Flattery and Schwartz provide a significant amount of data to argue that, while deemphasized in medieval and post-medieval texts, the importance given to the hallucinogenic or intoxicating quality of *haoma* and *soma* is quite clear and unmistakable in the early texts. They argue that other intoxicating substances, used in order to produce visions or insights into the spiritual realm, tended to be substituted in the medieval texts, including the middle Persian *mang* (*bang* in Pahlavi) and *dhattura* in the Tibetan context. Thus, the incorporation of *dhattura* in Tibetan *homa* rites suggests a direct connection to the *haoma* rituals long practiced by Inner Asian groups.

¹¹³ See Iranbakhsh, Oshagi and Ebadi (2007).

¹¹⁴ Scattered references to *datura* in Tibetan rites can be found in Gray (2007), Davidson (2002), and Siklos (1993 & 1996).

¹¹⁵ Siklos (1993).

Perhaps the most common substance burned in *homa* sacrifices is the mustard seed (skt. *sarṣapa*). *Sarṣapa* is defined by Monier Williams as ‘mustard seed,’ but also as ‘a kind of poison.’¹¹⁶ Even in *śāntika* rites, the burning of mustard seeds is accompanied by the burning of transgressive substances. For example, in a *śāntika* rite, the Tibetan translation of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* prescribes the burning of white mustard seeds (*śvetasarṣapānām*) combined with the burning of transgressive substances such as human flesh, bones and hair.¹¹⁷ The *Vīṇāśikhatantra*, a *Śaiva* text, prescribes that the following substances should be burned in sorcery rites: “human hairs, feathers of crows, white mustard, poison and blood” while the practitioner, naked, mediates on Indra as being black and the victim as being red. And, “having caused them to enter by way of the yogic duct into the victim’s boy, will by means of this practice bring the threefold world under his power.”¹¹⁸

Another word for mustard, used in the *Vīṇāśikhatantra*, is *kaṭutaila*. *Kaṭu*, defined as pungent or ill smelling,¹¹⁹ is mixed with substances such as human hairs, ashes from cremation pyre, poison, blood and feathers from tail plumes of crow. Verse 166 prescribes that one should ‘pound these objects together and sacrifice [*homayet*] with them.’¹²⁰ Seeds crackle and explode when burned, creating noises and sounds that contributes to the apotropaic function of *tantric homa* rites.

¹¹⁶ Monier Williams, pg. 1189.

¹¹⁷ Verse 63a. Skorupski (1983), pg. 68 (skt. on pg. 222).

¹¹⁸ Goudriaan (1985), pg. 114-5 (skt on pg. 74).

¹¹⁹ Monier-Williams, pg. 244.

¹²⁰ Goudriaan (1985), pg. 115 (skt on pg. 74).

Although the burning of mustard and sesame seeds (as well as oils) comprise a central element of *tantric homa* rites, I have not been able to locate any instances of seeds, mustard or otherwise, being burned in Vedic oblations. In fact, *sarṣapa* rarely occurs at all in early Vedic literature. No listing for *sarṣapa* or *sārṣapa* can be found in Bloomfield's Vedic concordance or in Whitney's Atharva Veda index. Also, *sarṣapa* does not occur in *Śathapatha Brahmaṇa* and only once in the *Kauśika Sūtra*, where it refers to the oil not the seeds (“*iti sārṣapaṃ tailasaṃpātaṃ badhnāti*” KauśS 4.6.30.1).¹²¹ In contrast, medieval Atharvanic texts, such as Keśava's *Kauśikasūtra paddhati* and portions of the AV *Parīṣiṣṭas* contain many references to *sarṣapa*, often in conjunction with *homa* rites. This would suggest that *homa* rites had developed in Vedic (Atharvanic) literature more fully by the time of the *Parīṣiṣṭa*'s and *Paddhati*'s composition (to be further argued in Chapter Four).

The apotropaic burning of seeds, a characteristic mark of *homa* rites, does not originate in the Vedic sacrificial paradigm. It can, however, be unequivocally traced to the Indo-Iranian or Central Asian ritual complex. Flattery and Schwartz identify *haoma* as *peganum harmala*, (Pers. *esfand*, *sipand*, or *hazārispand*).¹²² They base their argument, in part, on the evidence that *harmala* has long been used in Iranian apotropaic rites. However, perhaps the biggest problem with this thesis is that

¹²¹References to *sarṣapa* in *KauśS paddhati* occur in the compound ‘*sarṣapedhma*’ nine times and in ‘*sarṣapasamidha*’ six times. It is not clear if this means a fire stick smeared with mustard oil [the word for oil absent] or if it refers to the wood from a mustard plant. Since mustard plants have stems, not wood, neither of these translations makes much sense. Therefore, it may refer to fire sticks that have mustard seeds on it. Also, KauśS *paddhati* 4.6.30.1 makes reference to ‘*sarṣapakāṇḍamaṇiṃ*,’ which MW defines as a kind of poisonous root.

¹²² According to W B Henning, derivation can be traced to Old Iranian ‘*spenta*,’ meaning ‘sacred’ (Henning, 1977).

harmala contains many seeds, which are burnt in the ritual fire.¹²³ *Haoma*, in contrast, does not contain seeds. Avestan and later Persian sources make no mention of *haoma*'s seeds, only the stalks of *haoma*, from which a juice is extracted.

The burning of *harmala*, or *esfand*, seeds, though, perhaps represents the link to the burning of mustard seeds found in later *tantric homa* rites. First, *harmala*, like mustard seeds, has both white and black varieties; often referred to as Syrian rue (which visually looks quite similar to the mustard plant). Second, like the mustard seeds in *homa* rites, *harmala* seeds are burnt in the fire for a number of magico-medical purposes, including averting evil influences, banishing the evil eye, and curing seventy-two varieties of ailments.¹²⁴ Finally, the explosive sounds emitted from the mustard seeds in *homa* are considered to contribute to its apotropaic function. *Harmala* seeds make a similar popping sound, described as follows: "These seeds have an unusual tendency to snap dramatically when placed in contact with fire, and they then emit volumes of richly scented smoke, describable as having 'a heavy, narcotic odor.'"¹²⁵ And, in response to Henning's thesis that the burning of *harmala* was a form of witchcraft, Flattery and Schwartz describe that, "the seeds are thrown onto braziers not primarily to elicit smoke, fat, black, or otherwise . . . but for the snapping sound and the pungent fumes released, results intended not to invoke

¹²³ Moreover, the fourfold criteria Flattery and Schwartz use to identify *haoma* as *harmala* includes that it is: 1) used as intoxicant by early Indo-Iranians, 2) available over Indo-Iranian areas, 3) revered as sacred, 4) consumed in the central rites of their priests. Not only are these parameters questionable, but many plants could potentially fit the criteria set forth. Flattery and Schwartz (1989), pg. 11.

¹²⁴ Omidshah (1977).

¹²⁵ Flattery and Schwartz (1989), pg. 43; (quoting Dymock 1889:255).

demons but, on the contrary, to be rid of them.”¹²⁶ The significance and widespread nature of the burning of *harmala* is attested by the fact that it is still practiced for apotropaic purposes in Iran, even by contemporary Muslims.

Other rites incorporating the apotropaic burning of seeds seem to be similarly ancient among Persian groups. For example, at Persian weddings, poppy seeds (*khash-khaash*) or Nigella seeds are burned in a ritual fire in order to “To break spells and witchcraft” and other substances, such as frankincense, are offered, “to burn the evil spirits.”¹²⁷ Although Vedic rituals, including *soma* rites, have also been explained as a means to battle evil, or thwart the enemy, the function and form of Persian rites, particularly the apotropaic burning of seeds, seems much more in tune with the later forms of *tantric homa*.

Conclusion

Tantric homa rites have developed as a result of the confluence of numerous cultural influences. They have long been considered by scholars to be Vedic in origin, with the addition of specifically *tantric* elements. However, the structural elements, substances employed, and overall ritual technology encompassed by *tantric homa* rites diverge significantly from Vedic fire rituals; at least from the rites contained in Vedic texts.¹²⁸ Many of these non-Vedic elements, including fire

¹²⁶ Ibid, pg. 47.

¹²⁷ “Persian Wedding Traditions and Customs,” farsinet.com.

¹²⁸ In his most recent book, Geoffrey Samuel (2008:22) questions the extent to which Vedic texts, or texts in general, can be accurately seen as representative of religions of the respective period.

hearths, *maṇḍalas*, the burning of seeds, nomenclature, and even many of the ritual texts themselves, can be traced to Central or Inner Asian regions. Since many of these Inner Asian regions, including Gandhāra, Kashmir, and the Swāt Valley also have long had contact and exchange with South Asia, it certainly was not a one-way diffusion. However, to continue to treat *homa* as being Vedic in origin would be to continue masking the complex and very interesting history of the Asian ritual use of fire.

Therefore, absence from Vedic texts alone is not sufficient evidence to conclude that rites resembling *tantric homa* were not, in fact, practiced by people in India during the Vedic period.

Chapter Four: *Atharvanic Origins of Tantric Homa Rites*

During the Vedic period, there did not exist one elaborate, homogenous ritual system. Yet scholars of religion have generated various theoretical models and interpretations of Vedic sacrifice as if it were, in fact, a singular category. Similar to Staal, many western scholars have focused their attention almost exclusively on the elaborate *śrauta* rites and, as such, have neglected a wide range of fire sacrifices employed during Vedic times as well as throughout history. This chapter will attempt to move beyond the *śrauta* ritual paradigm to argue that the Vedic material reveals a multiplicity of ritual technologies that only later came to be systematized in the *śrauta* literature. Furthermore, the *śrauta* notion of Vedic sacrifice tends to obscure the resiliency and centrality of other forms of sacrifice employed in Asian religious practice, forms that are present in all the Vedas, but most explicit in the *Atharva Veda* and its ancillary literature.

Further investigation into the origins of *tantric homa* rites can serve as a methodological tool for highlighting understudied ritual forms in the Vedic material. The last chapter set out to argue that *tantric homa* rites cannot be considered exclusively Vedic in origin since, in part, they seem to have more in common with the Iranian ritual paradigm than with what has traditionally been described as Vedic. However, it would be just as misleading to argue that *tantric homa* rites originate in

an exclusively Iranian or Persian context. Rather, the rites as they exist in *tantric* texts and contemporary practice across Asia represent a process of development, in which certain ancient elements—locatable in a shared Indo-Iranian milieu—come to be appropriated and adapted into Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* schools. Moreover, although certain elements can be located in the ancient material, it is also clear that *homa* rites acquired new meanings and elements during the medieval period.

An historical search for the origins of *homa* can also be useful in helping us rethink familiar historical narratives and reified categories, such as the category ‘Vedic.’ When considering those elements of *tantric homa* rites that are shared with Vedic rituals, the most parallels can be found in the *Atharvanic* literature. However, the texts belonging to the *Atharva Veda* also do not represent a timeless or static paradigm. Therefore, by searching for origins of particular ritual elements, such as those associated with *tantric homa*, a certain history of *Atharvanic* ritual development is also revealed.

It would be an impossible task to develop a theory or assessment of ‘*Atharvanic* ritual’ vs. ‘*R̥g Vedic*’ or ‘*Śrauta*’ ritual. Clearly, there exists a significant overlap and appropriation amongst and between the various Vedic *śākhās*.¹ However, certain themes and ritual technologies are more prevalent in, and thus seem to characterize, *Atharvanic* texts more than the other three Vedic branches. Since some of these themes undoubtedly can still be located in various *R̥g*, *Yajur* or

¹ Not only is one-seventh of the AVŚ found also in the RVS, but some genres of RV literature, particularly the Vidhāna literature, betray the use of alternative ritual modes, such as ‘magic’ formulae designed to combat demons and heal the sick (see, for example, Bhat, 1987).

Sāma Vedas, any claims made here about an ‘*Atharvanic*’ ritual paradigm should be taken as general characteristics, or “family resemblances,”² rather than as an attempt to develop some absolute or infallible category. That being said, the ritual idiom revealed in the *Atharvanic* literature shares much more in common with that found in the paradigmatic *tantric* model. Since both ‘*Atharvanic*’ and ‘*tantric*’ represent dubious and ultimately unsustainable categories, I think it is important to not cling to these scholarly designations too tightly. It would be inaccurate to argue that ‘*Atharvanic*’ rites historically influenced or evolved into ‘*tantric*’ rites. Rather, it probably is more appropriate to consider how those clusters of practices we now label as ‘*tantric*’ represented mainstream trends and rites even before being recorded or systemized in specific texts or schools.

Although the *Atharva Veda Samhitā* and some ancillary texts predate Hindu *tantric* literature, portions of other *Atharva Veda* texts are composed at a much later date, likely contemporaneous with the composition of many *tantras*. For example, though the *Kauśikasūtra* dates to 2nd or 3rd centuries BCE, Keśava’s *Kauśikasūtra Paddhati*, which contains far more material pertaining to *homa*, is composed much later, probably in the 10th century. Similarly, though most of the *Pariśiṣṭa* material is quite ancient, other portions were added much later. Van Den Bosch, citing Bolling and von Negelein, dates the final compilation very late—sometime in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century—though he admits that the language of many

² A Wittgensteinian phrase used by Douglas Brooks in his discussion of the salient features of *tantra* (1991).

*śloka*s “recalls in style that of the *purāṇas*.”³ Modak, however, based upon a comparative textual study, argues that the bulk of the seventy-two *Parīṣiṣṭa* chapters can be dated between the 2nd century BCE and 5th century CE.⁴ Given the common nomenclature and ritual forms found in *Atharva Veda Parīṣiṣṭas* and certain *tantras* (and the absence of that nomenclature in the AVŚ), it is quite likely that some portions were authored contemporaneously. This does not necessarily indicate influence or diffusion from one ‘system’ to the other. Instead, the medieval *Atharvanic* and *tantric* texts likely draw upon common Indo-Iranian source material to record certain popular practices.

Four distinctive yet related arguments will be made in this chapter: 1) the *Atharva Veda* reveals a ritual paradigm that differs from the typical re-creation of Vedic *śrauta* sacrifice; 2) the early ritual technologies revealed in the AVŚ overlap significantly with those found in the Zoroastrian *Avesta*; 3) *Atharvanic* and *tantric* fire rites share more in common than *Atharvanic* and *Śrauta* rites, and; 4) *homa* sacrifices delineated in the AV *Parīṣiṣṭas* reveals the most significant overlap with *homa* found in *tantric* traditions.

Traividya Plus One: The position of the Atharva Veda in the Vedic Lexicon

The first problem with presuming a category of ‘Vedic sacrifice’ is, of course, the designation ‘Vedic’ itself. In the later Vedic texts, such as various

³ Van den Bosch (1978), pg. 2.

⁴ Modak (1993), pg. 473.

Brāhmaṇas, the *Atharva Veda* generally is treated as different, or outside of, the accepted Veda divisions. Modak points out that the *Atharvanic* texts have been greatly underestimated even though they reveal a great deal regarding Vedic rituals. He writes that the *Atharva Veda* “opens wide the door that the Ṛg Veda puts ajar.”⁵

While the Ṛg Veda represents the ‘Veda of the classes,’ Modak points out that the *Atharva Veda* literature can be characterized as the ‘Veda of the masses,’ revealing ‘popular undercurrents’ in ritual practice such as magic, medicine, witchcraft, and belief in benevolent and malevolent spirits.⁶ While this point is valuable, it should be noted that the *Atharvanic* rites were not merely representative of ‘popular’ (vs. elitist) religion. Recently, it has been argued that the *purohita*, the King’s chaplain, represents the royal (and, hence, elite) nature of *Atharvanic* rites. Aaron Ullrey writes, “The *purohita*—foremost *brāhmaṇa* in the court and kingdom—deploys his occult potency (*brahman*) in order to perform and repel sorcery . . . he is ‘placed in front’ (*puro*√*dhā*) of the king, and there he performs occult maneuvers on the king’s behalf.”⁷ Therefore, while the literature belonging to the *Atharva Veda* certainly reveals ‘popular’ undercurrents, it also reveals ritual technologies that were regularly employed in royal contexts.

The fourth Veda has been referred to with a number of titles in Hindu literature including *Atharvāṅgirasah*, *Bhṛgvaṅgirasa*, *Āngirobhyah Svāhā*, and as *Atharvah* or *Angirasah* separately. Bloomfield makes a convincing argument that

⁵ Modak (1993), pg. 13.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 1-2.

⁷ Ullrey (2006), pg. 40.

Atharvan tends to be used when referring to the “auspicious practices of the Veda” including the *bheṣagāni*, *śāntika*, and *pauṣtika* rites. In other words, those recognized by the orthodox *Brahmāṇical* writings. *Āṅgiras*, on the other hand, is used to refer “to the hostile sorcery practices of the Veda, the *yātu*, (Sat. Br. X, 5, 2, 20), or *abhicāra*, which is terrible (*ghora*).”⁸ He cites many examples to demonstrate that *aṅgirasa* and *abhicāra* (or *abhikarana*) are used synonymously, such as in the compounds *pratyāṅgirasa* and *pratyabhikaraṇa*, which both refer to ‘counter-witchcraft’.⁹

Modak concurs with the above division of rituals, i.e. the ‘wholesome’ rites of *Atharvans* (*bhaiṣaja*, *śānta* and *pauṣtika*) versus the ‘black/exorcistic’ (*ghora* or *abhicāra*) rituals of the *Āṅgirasas*, and argues that much of the reason that *Atharvanic* literature is excluded is due to the magic potency of *Atharvan mantras* (often associated with *yātu* or ‘witchcraft’), which is considered impure.¹⁰ In Hindu literature generally, the *Atharva Veda* is excluded from the ‘*traividyā*’ (*Rg*, *Sāman*, *Yajus*) list and included only secondarily, as one of many in “a lengthy list of additional literary forms.”¹¹ While Modak hints that this exclusion was at least partly intentional, Bloomfield seems to doubt the intentionality. Either way, it is clear that the *Atharvanic* literature represented a different genre of literature (and, hence, varying ritual frame of reference) than the other three Vedas.

⁸ *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*, pg. xviii. In a footnote, Bloomfield points to *KauśS* 3, 19, and note 5 on p. 11, for a distinction between *śānta* and *abhikārika*.

⁹ *Ibid*, pg. xix.

¹⁰ Modak (1993), pg. 25.

¹¹ Bloomfield, *Hymns*, pg. xxxiv-xxxvii.

Jatindra Chatterji gives an alternative, though not necessarily contradictory, interpretation. He argues that the *Atharva Veda* actually represents two texts: the *Bhargava Saṃhitā* and the *Āṅgīrasa Saṃhitā*. While Bloomfield assumed that the compound *bhṛgvāṅgīrasaḥ* referred to two teachers or authors, Chatterji argues that it refers to two different books—with the *Bhargava Saṃhitā* being the Iranian text, the Avesta. He writes, “To Panini the book was quite familiar even in its Iranian name . . . there is no doubt that the Avesta is the scripture of Ahura-worship. And the preceptor of Ahura-worship is, in India, called Bhrigu.”¹² Therefore, he continues, “the Avesta is the scripture of Bhrigu and that its Indian name would more aptly be Bhargava Samhita. To fail to see in the Avesta the scripture of Bhrigu is to be blind to actual facts.”¹³ While he may not be able to prove his argument beyond doubt, he does marshal an impressive amount of data to demonstrate that the AVŚ and *Avesta* are intimately related to each other and that the quintessential fire priest, *Atharvan* Zarathustra, “may be said to still be reigning over Asia in spite of all appearances to the contrary.”¹⁴

Atharvans in the Avesta and the Atharva Veda

The first clue that *homa* rites have some precedence in the *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā* (AVŚ) can be found in one designation given to AV texts in later

¹² Chatterji (1967), pg. ii.

¹³ Ibid, pg. iii.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. v.

“orthodox” literature—*śāntikapauṣṭikābhicārādipratipādaka*,’ or that which is used “to appease, to bless, and to curse”.¹⁵ These terms correspond directly to the three categories of *homa* found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Also, since there exists significant parallels between *Avestan* and *Atharva Veda* literature, it would make sense that *tantric homa* rites developed within a context shared by both traditions. As one example, *Yasna* 10.6 refers to *haoma* [the plant] as ‘the killer (*ganya*) of a thousand (*hazara*) demons (*daevānām*)’. Likewise, AVŚ 8.8.17 declares that *homa* is that which ‘slays thousands’ (*homaḥ sahasrahaḥ*).¹⁶ Multiple other examples of shared terminology between the *Avesta* and AVŚ suggest that the authors of the texts were undoubtedly in contact with each other or at least drew upon common sources.

First, the title *atharvan* (fire-priest) is employed in both the *Avesta* and the *Atharva Veda*. Bloomfield characterizes the *atharvan* and the *aṅgiras* of the AVŚ as ‘fire-priests, fire-churners’¹⁷ and, in the *Avesta*, the title of *atharvan* often is given to Zarathustra as well as referring generally to one who officiates a fire sacrifice. *Atar* (or *âthro*, *adar*, *atash* etc.) means ‘fire’ and, just as in Sanskrit, the suffix ‘*van*’ implies possession. So, *Atharvan* literally translates as ‘one possessing fire,’ much like *Ashavan* means ‘one possessing *Asha*’ (righteousness, equivalent to Skt *ṛta*). Moreover, as pointed out by many scholars, several shared deities, including Mithra, Indra, Trita (Thrita), and Apam Napāt can be found in both *Avestan* and Vedic texts.

¹⁵ Bloomfield, *Hymns*, pg. xxix.

¹⁶ Here, *homa* and *gharma* seem to be used synonymously. The whole *śloka* reads: *gharmaḥ samiddho agnināyam homaḥ sahasrahaḥ bhavaśca pṛśnibāhuśca śarva senāmamūm hatam* (Roth/Whitney, 1966, pg. 187).

¹⁷ Bloomfield, *Hymns*, pg. xxiii.

Next, the *Avesta* and AVŚ share certain ritual concepts. Both texts employ terms such as *yātu* and *kavi*, which often portray the meaning of sorcerer or sorcery to be combated by the *Atharvan*¹⁸ And, both textual traditions contain multiple formulas intended for the purposes of exorcism, calling down curses against enemies, and for healing. Human afflictions, such as sickness and disease, are understood to have a demonic cause. Thus, both traditions rely upon a healer-priest to exorcise the demons that have caused such afflictions. The AVŚ name given to healer-priests, *bhiṣaj*, can be compared to Avestan term *bishaz* (or *bishazyât*). In the Vedic lexicon, this term seems to be unique to the AVŚ, as it is not found in the other three *Samhitās*.

Both traditions establish formulaic remedies (*bheṣaja/baêshaza*) that serve as the building blocks for later medical traditions. The AVŚ serves as the foundation for many later *āyurvedic* and alchemical texts¹⁹ and, the Avestan *Vendidad* (also known as *Videvdat*—*Vi-daeua-dāt*; ‘given against the demons’) contains most of the rites concerned with purification of demons and healing the sick, considered one in the

¹⁸ In the Atharva Veda, *yātu* sometimes refers to witchcraft, considered ‘evil,’ but it is also clear that these practices are sanctioned and practiced by priests such as the *purohita*. Witzel makes the argument that *yātu* is a loan word that predates both textual traditions (see Witzel, 2006). *Kavi*, often is translated as incantation in the AVŚ, comes to mean ‘king’ in Pahlavi literature, but, ‘evil priest’ appears to be the more archaic use of the term (Kellens, 1975, pg. 269-70). See Chapter Five for further discussion of *yātu* and *kavi*.

¹⁹ Re: AV as base for *Āyurveda*, cf. Macdonell (1962, pg. 165), Karambelkar (1961), and Mishra (2003, pg. 127). Also, regarding this point, David White writes, “it is in this text [the AVŚ] that one finds the greatest preponderance of healing hymns involving the use of charms and herbal remedies to restore the ailing patient to health. At the center of this practice stood the healer (*bhiṣaj*) who was also a possessed ‘shaker’ (*vipra*) and an inspired master of incantation (*kavi*)” (White, 1996, pg. 13).

same.²⁰ The formulas employed in both traditions are recited by the *bhiṣaj/bishaz* in order to combat comparable afflictions in the human body (*tanu* in both languages).²¹ The terms for some of these afflictions also are quite similar—internal sickness (skt. *yakśma*, Avestan *yaska*), fever (skt. *takman*, Avestan *tanfu*), and poison (skt. *viṣa*, Avestan *vish*). Two terms for the sacred word, a required element in healing, are almost identical in both traditions—Sanskrit *vac/mantra* and Avestan *vaca/manthra*.

In fact, the primary means of eradication in both traditions *is* recitation of the sacred word. In the AVŚ, there exists a correlation between the divine and the earthly healer-priest: “The best healer indeed is he whom has created the disease. Yet, the pure physician [here] shall provide the remedies for you.”²² Although herbs, amulets, and rituals accompany many of the healing rites, recitation of sacred *mantra* or formulaic spell (*brahman*) is essential. Zysk explains as follows:

The mantra, or magico-religious utterance, was the key component of the healing rite. When properly executed at the designated auspicious time and place, the healer was able to unlock the door to the realm of the spirits and obtain the power necessary to ward off or destroy disease and to make medicines efficacious. Only the healer controlled the mantra, so that he alone governed the power to heal. Armed with his arsenal of mantras and other weapons of magic he set about his task of removing disease.²³

²⁰ A ritual, simply called ‘Vendidad,’ continues to be performed today in both Iran and India. During this ceremony, the entire text of the Vendidad is recited as a means to exorcise demons.

²¹ A compound found in the Avesta, *tanu-mathrem*, literally translates as ‘mantra-body,’ but most often is translated as ‘obedience incarnate.’ However, given the later tantric emphasis on construction a body of *mantras* (during the *bhūtaśuddhi*), the Avestan compound is very intriguing.

²² AVŚII.9.5. All AVŚ translations are my own, based upon the mss published by Roth and Whitney (1966) and in consultation with Whitney’s translation (1971).

²³ Zysk (1989), pg. 125.

When herbs and amulets are employed, it is only through the infusion of sacred *mantras* that they become efficacious. Therefore, the words of the AVŚ, recited by the healer-priest, expel demons and cure diseases. The spell, *mantra* or *brahman*, is thus conceived of as a weapon (*heti*) to be hurled at all enemies and afflictions, including disease.²⁴

Magico-religious utterances comprise an essential element of *Avestan* healing rites as well. Although magic allegedly is condemned in the *Avesta*, the formulas in the *Vendidad* chapters demonstrate that magical means were, and still are, employed to heal sicknesses and to drive out demons.²⁵ Specifically, three types of healers are enumerated in the *Vendidad*: “one who heals with the knife [*karetô-baêshazêscā*], one who heals with herbs [*urvarô-baêshazêscā*], and one who heals with the Holy Word [*māthrô-baêshazêscā*].”²⁶ And of these three, “the best-healing of all healers [is he] who heals with the Holy Word; he will best drive away sickness from the body of the faithful.”²⁷ Some have argued that this trifunctional approach to healing is Indo-European²⁸ in origin; others Indo-Iranian.²⁹ However, Sigerist argues that proponents of both origin arguments have “overlooked the fact that the division of medical treatments into pharmacology, surgery, and magic is universal in archaic

²⁴ Cf. AVŚ IV.18.9.

²⁵ Also, there likely were many magical texts that did not survive. Regarding this point, see Lokesh Chandra, in Ligeti (1984), pg. 99 and Henning (1947).

²⁶ *Vendidad* 7:44.

²⁷ *Ibid*; for a parallel verse, see also Khorda Avesta 3.6.

²⁸ cf. Lincoln’s discussion of the Indo-European trifunctional approach to healing, with the knife being *ksatriya*, the herbs *vaisyā* and the *mantras brahmin*. (1996).

²⁹ “Filiozat and others have pointed out that these three methods of treatment are the same ones that Pindar mentions in the ode where he speaks of Chiron instructing Asclepius, and from that analogy they concluded that this threefold division of medicine must be Indo-Iranian.” (Sigerist, 1961, pg. 202).

medicine, and may be found in Egypt and Mesopotamia as well as in China.”³⁰

Regardless of origin, it is clear that recitation of proper *mantras* is considered the most efficacious form of healing in the Avesta and in *Atharvanic* literature.

As in the AVŚ, the Avesta primarily prescribes powerful *mantras* in order to expel demons and heal the sick. Even when other means are employed, they are always accompanied by *mantric* recitation. Especially powerful words (*vaca*) are found in the *mantra* related to Airyaman, the bountiful immortal of health and healing. The Khorda Avesta states, “The Airyaman prayer smites down the strength of all the creatures of Angra Mainyu, of the Yatus and Pairikas.”³¹ Similarly, in the *Vendidad*, the following request is made: “May the vow-fulfilling Airyaman smite all manner of sickness and death, all the Yatus and Pairikas, and all the wicked Jainis.”³²

The two textual traditions share other similarities as well. For example, the first person voice is used much more frequently in the AVŚ than in the other three *Samhitās*, especially in relation to ritual efficacy. In the *traividya* texts, typically a deity is called upon to smite the enemy, or to free one from various forms of

³⁰ Sigerist (1961), pg. 202.

³¹ Khorda Avesta 3.5. The rest of the verse continues, “It is the greatest of spells, the best of spells, the very best of all spells; the fairest of spells, the very fairest of all spells; the fearful one amongst spells, the most fearful of all spells; the firm one amongst spells, the firmest of all spells; the victorious one amongst spells, the most victorious of all spells; the healing one amongst spells, the best-healing of all spells.” All Khorda Avesta translations from Darmesteter, *et al.* (1893).

³² Vendidad Fargard 22:24. This is borrowed from Fargard 20:9, and within the context of Ahura Mazdā proclaiming Thrīta as the first healer. Interestingly, AVŚ V.1.1 refers to ‘Trīta,’ along with Varuna. Though he is not specifically invoked as the first healer in this verse, he is referred to as the one who wipes away sins and banishes *grahī* in AVŚ VI.11.3. Trīta appears in later mythology, such as in the myth of the three Aptyas, whose names are First, Second, and Third (Trīta), in the *Jaiminiya Brahmana*. (see O’Flaherty, 1985, p. 53ff.) and in the Mahābhārata myth of Trīta in the well.

oppression. For example, Indra and Soma are often called upon jointly to destroy the demons: “Indra and Soma, burn the demons and crush them . . . shatter those who lack good thoughts; scorch them, kill, drive out, cut down the devourers.”³³ Similar passages can be found in the AVŚ. However, in the AVŚ, first person verbs also are regularly employed, with the actor presumably being the *Atharvan* priest. For example, a common phrase employed in AVŚ is ‘*druho muñcāmi*’—I release [you] from *druhas*.³⁴ *Druhas*, commonly translated as ‘harm/hurt/destruction;’ and considered the opposite of righteousness (*ṛta*), can be compared to the common Avestan term for destruction or evil, *druj*, also considered the dualistic opposite of righteousness (*asha*).³⁵

As in the AVŚ, Avestan texts employ first person narration to describe the ritual defeat of evil. Although the divine power of Ahura Mazda or other divine beings (such as Haoma or Sraosha) is called upon to aid in the battle against the enemy (*druj* or *daeva*), it is an earthly agent who actually destroys the *druj*: “Give us, O Ahura, that powerful sovereignty, by the strength of which *we* may smite down the Druj! By its might may *we* smite the Druj.”³⁶ Moreover, the use of first person voice further suggests that the individual priest wields power of his own to combat a

³³ RV 7.104.1; translation by O’Flaherty.

³⁴ *Muñcāmi* is rarely employed in the other Samhitās, occurring only three times in the RVS (in the tenth *maṇḍala*) and only in the AVŚ does it occur with *druho*.

³⁵ Further examples of the first person voice in the AVŚ are provided in the next section.

³⁶ “This clause is borrowed, with some alteration, from Yasna 31.4; the original translation reads, ‘May that strong power come to me, by the might of which we may smite down the Druj!’” Emphasis is my own.

number of specific forms of *druj*. In one example, the performer of the rite recites the following:

I drive away Ishire and I drive away Aghuire; I drive away Aghra and I drive away Ughra; I drive away sickness and I drive away death; I drive away pain and I drive away fever; I drive away Sarana and I drive away Sarastya; I drive away Azhana and I drive away Azhahva; I drive away Kurugha and I drive away Azhivaka; I drive away Duruka and I drive away Astairya. I drive away the evil eye, rottenness, and infection which Angra Mainyu has created against the bodies of mortals. I drive away all manner of sickness and death, all the Yatus and Pairikas, and all the wicked Jainis.³⁷

Mantras recited in certain purification rites contain similar first person narration. In reply to a question of how to fight against the *druj*, Ahura Mazda replies that one should say aloud words of the Gathas and then, “Thou shalt say aloud these victorious, most healing words: ‘I drive away Indra, I drive away Sauru, I drive away the daeva Naunghaithya, [etc.]’”³⁸ It is the *mantric* words, recited by healer-priests, that effect the destruction of the enemies: “These are the words that smite down Angra Mainyu; these are the words that smite down Aeshma, the fiend of the murderous spear; these are the words that smite down the daevas of Mazana; these are the words that smite down all the daevas.”³⁹ Thus it is the earthy priest, first

³⁷ Vendidad Fargard 22:21-22. Note also that in response to question: “How shall I drive away from thee those nine diseases, and those ninety, those nine hundred, those nine thousand, and those nine times ten thousand diseases?” (Vd. 22:6) The answer given is the Airyaman mantra (Vd. 20.9-13).

³⁸ Vd. 10:9.

³⁹ Vd. 10:16.

represented in the *Atharvan* Zarathustra, who *acts* in order to combat disease, death, and all other varieties of *druj*.⁴⁰

This interpretation resonates with the contemporary interpretation of Zoroastrian ritual expressed by Dastur Firoze Kotwal, one of only seven practicing high priests. He explains that his performance of ritual, such as the daily *yasna*, represents his conscious decision to engage in the battle against Angra Mainyu and all his wicked creations. Regarding the ‘cosmic’ theological context of the profession of faith, recited at the beginning of the *yasna* liturgy, Kotwal explains, “The priests commit their lives to a battle of universal proportions in order to conquer evil even in the face of their own personal destruction.”⁴¹ The sacred utterances included in the rites not only are a profession of faith, they are also performative utterances, through which the priest “is seeking to bring about the actual situation of personal and social righteousness, to take an ethical stance then and there.”⁴²

Therefore, although there may be no way to reconstruct a clear historical picture, the AVŚ and *Avestan* texts employ some common terminology and ritual technologies and, thus, likely drew upon common source material or at least contemporaneous vocabulary and trends. Both prescribe apotropaic *mantras* for the purpose of combating various forms of demonic beings and earthly enemies. Given the regrettable loss of so many early Zoroastrian texts (combined with the alterations

⁴⁰ Another example can be found in Vd. 11:2. In the cleansing of sacrificial objects, one is to recite, in part, the following: “I drive away the Pairika that comes upon the fire, upon the water, upon the earth, upon the cow, upon the tree. I drive away the uncleanness that comes upon the fire, upon the water, upon the earth, upon the cow, upon the tree.”

⁴¹ Kotwal and Boyd (1991), pg. 11.

⁴² Kotwal and Boyd (1991), pg. 11.

that took place under the reformation of Zoroaster), the comparative possibilities remain limited. Regardless of the origin or affiliation with *Avestan* texts, however, it is clear that the priests of the *Atharva Veda* represent a varying ‘Vedic’ typology—one that shares many qualities with the *Atharvan* Zarathustra and, later, with *tantric* practitioners.

Vedic vs. Tantric

In South Asian scholarship, it has become commonplace to speak of Vedic and Tantric as categories designating different modes of belief and worship. Most scholars would agree, however, that both designations are elusive and depend largely upon the perspective or approach employed. Regarding practices involving fire, however, there do seem to be some characteristic elements that differentiate Vedic and Tantric fire sacrifice. It should be kept in mind that the category ‘Vedic’ almost always is constructed based upon the *śrauta sūtras* and the texts belonging to the *traīvidyā*. Still, it is useful to review some of the basic elements that have been identified as differentiating Vedic and Tantric forms of sacrifice.

Wade T. Wheelock compares the use of language in the Vedic *śrauta* rites and in *tantric pūjā*. While each of these systems has multiple forms, he argues that there is a distinct “developmental structure implicit in each liturgy.”⁴³ Wheelock is particularly concerned with the recitation of *mantras* in each ritual system, but many of his points can be directly applied to Vedic and *tantric* ritual forms generally.

⁴³ Wheelock (1989), pg 119.

One feature common to Vedic liturgies in general is the division of labor amongst priests. Wheelock writes, “one needs to recognize that the Vedic ritual works on the assumption of a division of labor among the various participants, with the speaking role of each expressing a significantly different view of his ritual identity and function.”⁴⁴ The *homa* described in the *Gṛhyasūtras*, a late layer in the *śrauta* paradigm, supports his conclusion. Kane compiles a description of the *homa* from various *Gṛhyasūtras* that, like most Vedic liturgies, incorporates four main priests as well as the participation of the wife.⁴⁵ The *homa* employed within larger ‘Vedic’ rites today similarly employ four priests.⁴⁶ There also exists a division amongst three ritual fires in the Vedic rites whereas *tantric* rites tend to center around a singular ritual fire.

The multiplicity of priests and fires in Vedic rites has other implications. Both *tantric* and Vedic liturgical systems emphasize “the homologization of the ritual to a divine reality”⁴⁷ but in the Vedic case, “one finds a more variegated and constantly changing amalgam of divine resonances.”⁴⁸ Vedic priests may identify parts of their bodies with a variety of gods, but “there is no unified nor even consistent parallel of worshipper and god.”⁴⁹ *Tantric* rites, on the other hand, tend to focus on a direct correlation between a singular divine being—who becomes present in the fire—and the worshipper. Wheelock writes, “Tantric liturgy is working to

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 105.

⁴⁵ Kane (1941), pg. 210.

⁴⁶ See Tachikawa (1993, 2001).

⁴⁷ Wheelock (1989), pg. 108.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pg. 105.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pg. 107.

realize the *one*, all-encompassing *bandhu*: god = ritual = worshipper.”⁵⁰ This characterization also holds true for the *tantric homa* rites where there is clear unity between the individual practitioner and the main deity—who becomes present in the ritual fire.

Finally, while both Vedic and *tantric* liturgies include the recitation of mantras to avert evil, Wheelock argues that the way in which the language functions reveal differing ritual structures. Specifically, in Vedic *śrauta* rites, the ‘sacrifice’ itself becomes a reified entity—addressed in second person terms and seen as superior even to the gods. The implication here is that the sacrifice itself is credited with the defeat of evil, which deemphasizes the direct role of the practitioners. In other words, the recitation of Vedic mantras serve as punctuation in the defeat of evil while the recitation of *tantric* mantras actually *effects* the destruction. Wheelock argues this point as follows:

The numerous mantras of this type in the Vedic liturgy have some form of evil as the subject in the third person followed by a past participle that defines the just completed act of the *advaryu* as doing away with that demonic force. The act itself may be graphic in its symbolic import, but the accompanying mantra is required to make explicit that the action has indeed been effective against the invisible malevolent agencies. Throughout the Tantric liturgies, on the other hand, one does not *elucidate* the demon-expelling procedure with an articulate statement of accomplished effect but, rather, uses a nonsense *bīja* mantra to directly augment the process.⁵¹

This varying function of *mantra* reveals an essential difference between *tantric homas* and the Vedic forms of *homa* found in the *śrauta* literature. In the Vedic

⁵⁰ Ibid, pg. 117.

⁵¹ Ibid, pg. 107.

case, each actor and implement functions within a complex network of relationships characterized by “variegated and constantly changing amalgam of divine resonances.”⁵² In the *tantric* context, the officiant, through various gestures and mantras, directly activates the battle against evil.

Atharvanic Rites

Many of the points identified above could also be applied to differentiate *Atharvanic* and *śrauta* ritual technologies. These differences can be found in the early AVŚ and *KauśS* texts as well as in the later ancillary literature of the *Atharva Veda*.

First, the typical division of labor amongst priests does not seem to apply to many *Atharvan* rites. It has become commonplace to describe the four Vedas as corresponding to each of the four main Vedic priests; the *Ṛg Veda* with the *hotṛ*, the *Sāma* with the *udgātṛ*, *Yajur* with the *adhvaryu*, and *Atharva* with the silent *brahman* priest. Although this characterization may hold true to a certain extent, and certainly was applied in later *śrauta* public ceremonies, it does not do much for explaining a large proportion of rituals in the AVŚ. The fourfold division of priests seems, in fact, to apply to very few of the rites discussed in the AVŚ or in the ancillary literature. In most *Atharva Veda* rites, there is no mention of multiple priests but, instead, a single priest performs the actions and recites the *mantras*.

⁵² Ibid, pg. 105.

Perhaps part of the reason that a single priest, an *Atharvan*, presides over the rites is that rituals of the *Atharva Veda* tend to be geared toward everyday concerns of common people. Regarding *Atharvans* (fire-priests), Bloomfield writes, “in distinction from soma-priests, [they] may have had in their keeping these homelier practices of common life.”⁵³ However, this alone does not explain the relative lack of employing the fourfold division of priests. After all, in most of the non-solemn rites detailed in the *grhya* texts of the *traividyā*, the use of four priests is maintained.⁵⁴

The best explanation for why many *Atharvanic* rites seem to center on a singular priest is that the fourfold division of labor represents a later convention. Gavin Flood makes this argument, pointing out that the *Ṛg Veda* most often refers to only three priests and that the later incorporation of *brahman* priest represented a way of showing acceptance of the AVŚ.⁵⁵ Most likely, the move to correlate the *Atharva Veda* with the silent *brahman* priest, whose role is to oversee the process but not directly contribute, was a way of including, yet neutralizing, the Veda which was seen as outside or dangerous to the *traividyā* schema. Thus, the inclusion the *Atharvan* priest as a silent overseer was at once inclusive yet exclusive.⁵⁶

As mentioned above, the use of first person occurs much more frequently in the AVŚ than in the other *Samhitās*, suggesting one, rather than many, priests. For

⁵³ Bloomfield, *Hymns*, pg. xxiii.

⁵⁴ Cf. Kane (1968).

⁵⁵ Flood (1996), pg. 42.

⁵⁶ See also Heesterman’s claim that the silent *brahman* priest, identified with the *dīkṣita*, is a vestige of the pre-classical agonistic sacrificial system (1993, pg. 160-164).

example, a phrase used repeatedly in the AVŚ, “From Druh [and] from Varuna's fetter I release thee” (*druhó muñcāmi váruṇasya pāśāt*) is not found in any other *Samhitā*.⁵⁷ ‘Varuna’s fetter,’ (*vāruṇasya pāśāt*)⁵⁸ appears often in *YV Samhitā*, but it is either a general ‘he’ or Varuṇa himself who frees one from ‘Varuna’s fetter’ rather than the officiating priest. For example, in an *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* myth, Śunaḥśepa, the designated victim of a human sacrifice to Varuna, has his fetters fall away when, bound to the sacrificial post, he sings verses from the RV, imploring Varuna to release the fetters (*asmān rājā varuṇo mumoktu*).⁵⁹ In this instance, again, though the singing of Śunaḥśepa is the cause of the fetters falling away, it is Varuna (not the sacrificer) that effects the liberation. After his fetters are removed, Śunaḥśepa takes the role of sacrificial priest, completing Hariścandra’s rite by reciting RV 5.2.7: ‘Sunahsepa bound, you freed him from those thousand sacrificial posts when he was in pain.’⁶⁰ Here, Agni, the one credited with freeing Śunaḥśepa, is asked to also ‘free us from the bonds that bind us.’⁶¹

In contrast, the *Atharvan* priest is able to effect the destruction of fetters through his own powers. It is not, however, without assistance that he accomplishes this. Rather, he is assisted by oblations, herbs, amulets, and, particularly, *mantras*. Once again, it is via the actions and words of the priest that the ritual efficacy is

⁵⁷ It is, however, repeated a handful of times in *grhya sūtras* belonging to the Black Yajur Veda.

⁵⁸ *Vāruṇasya pāśāt* often is translated as ‘Varuṇa’s noose.’

⁵⁹ See RV 1.24.12-13. For a discussion of this myth, including how it reveals various conflicts in the Vedic sacrificial system, see White (1986).

⁶⁰ RV 5.2.7. Translation from White (1986), pg. 230.

⁶¹ The whole verse reads: *śunaś cic chepaṃ niditaṃ sahasrād yūpād amuñco aśamiṣṭa hi śaḥ / evāsmad agne vi mumugdhi pāśān hotaś cikitva iha tū niṣadya*

achieved—as opposed to the *mantras* merely narrating the destruction of evil or imploring the gods to do it, as in the *traividya* ritual systems. Although the gods definitely are invoked to grant release, the single officiating *Atharvan* apparently possesses similar powers: “With oblation, I free you (*muñcāmī*), for the sake of living, from unexpected sicknesses and even from pulmonary consumption.”⁶² Similarly, the healer-priest has the power even to bring a man back from the jaws of death: “If one’s life has ended or if he is deceased or even near to death, I deliver him (*harāmī*), the intangible one, from the lap of Nirṛti, for a hundred autumns.”⁶³

Later ancillary literature amplifies and extends the rites to be performed by a single officiant, most notably the *purohita*. In texts such as the *KauśS paddhati*, and the *Parīśiṣṭas*, multiple priests are mentioned, but there is a special relation between a king and his *purohita*. Modak points out that in several passages of the *Parīśiṣṭas*, it is stated that a king should choose an *Atharvavedin* as his *purohita* because *Atharvan* priests best understood the ways to ‘strengthen the king’. He writes, “By using this knowledge they claimed that they could realize the special wishes of the *yajamāna* [i.e. the king].”⁶⁴ This parallels the literature of the Śaiva Mantramārga, which similarly prescribe that the royal chaplain be an “Atharvavedin or expert in the apotropaic and other rites of the Atharvavedic tradition.”⁶⁵ Sanderson argues that the Śaivism of the Mantramārga successfully competed against the brahmanical religion, in part, by “forging close links with the institution of kingship and thereby with the

⁶² AVŚ 3.11.1

⁶³ AVŚ 3.11.2.

⁶⁴ Modak (1993), pg. 6.

⁶⁵ Sanderson (2005), pg. 5 ff. 5.

principal source of patronage.”⁶⁶ For example, a Śaiva officiant (*rājaguruḥ*) increased his authoritative position by encroaching “on the territory of the Rājapurohita, the brahmanical expert in the rites of the Atharvaveda who served as the personal priest of the king” and by performing modified versions of initiation and consecration rites (*dīkṣā* and *abhiṣekaḥ*) as “an empowerment to rule beyond that conferred by the conventional brahmanical royal consecration (*rājyābhiṣekaḥ*).”⁶⁷ Thus, the role of the Atharvavedin *purhoita*, who possesses apotropaic and healing powers, is appropriated and expanded by the Śaiva *tantric* priest (*rājaguruḥ*).

The *Caraka Samhita*, a medical text, offers further evidence that a single priest performed *Atharvanic rites*. The text prescribes that the best physicians are those devoted to the *Atharva Veda* because the *Atharvan* priest is versed in “*dāna, svasti, ayana, bali, mangala, homa, niyama, prayaścitta, upavāsa, and mantra*.”⁶⁸ In the above instances, the fourfold division of priests is not mentioned and it is clear that the *Atharvan* priest is in a class of his own.

In the *kalpas* belonging to the *Atharva Veda*, rites are detailed in such a way that further suggests they were performed by a single officiant. The *Mahāśāntikalpa* discusses a number of these rites, most notably the *Mahāśānti*, where the prescriptions are made for a singular ‘he’ rather than for multiple priests and the *mantras* recited, as in the AVŚ, contain first person singular forms of verbs. For example, the very first *śloka* gives the prescriptions for the service of the *nakṣatras*.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pg. 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pg. 4.

⁶⁸ Quoted and discussed by Zysk (1989, pg. 125).

The officiating priest should invoke (*āvāhayet*) the individual *nakṣatras*, starting with Kṛttika, with the following words: “*āvāhayiṣyāmi śubhām kṛttikām devapūjitām*” (I call forth the beautiful Kṛttika, who is worshiped by the gods).⁶⁹ This is followed by other verses bringing forth (invoking) the other twenty-seven *nakṣatras*. Throughout the rest of the *kalpa*, the ritual actions are prescribed in the singular case and the *mantras* recited are in first person, singular case.

The common use of first person through the *Atharvanic* texts not only suggests performance by a single officiant (as opposed to the traditional division of labor that characterizes most Vedic rites), but also signifies a differing perspective regarding ritual efficacy. In *Atharvanic* rites, similar to *tantric* rites, it is understood that the priest, not the sacrifice itself, effects the destruction (or aversion) of evil.

In the three *Samhitās* belonging to the *traividyā*, destruction of the enemy is a common theme, but it is the gods or the sacrifice itself that is called upon to effect the destruction. In the AVŚ, the gods also are called upon to smite the enemy. However, unlike the other *Samhitās*, the priest wields a power of his own in order to release others from the grip of malevolent forces. In an AVŚ charm to combat dropsy, the priest recites, “With my spell (*brahmaṇā*) I lead this one (*imam*) away from that place of the terrible spirit,”⁷⁰ and, “I fully free you from the eminent Vaiśvānara, who is restless.”⁷¹ Again, this differs from the language found in the

⁶⁹ All *Mahāśānti* translations are my own, based on and in consultation with the mss and translation offered by Bolling (1904).

⁷⁰ AVŚ I.10.1.

⁷¹ AVŚ I.10.4.

traividya literature, such as seen in the Śunaḥśepa legend above, where Varuna is implored to effect the liberation.

Similarly, in a healing ceremony against ‘worms,’ Indra is asked to help smite the worms, but the priest is the one who ‘grinds up,’ ‘slays,’ and ‘smashes’ [“like khalva-grains with a millstone”] the worms.⁷² Later in the rite, the priest recites the following charms:

I crush the ribs of it [the worm] and cut off that which is its head. I
kill you, worms, like Atri, like Kaṇva, [and] like Jamadagni.⁷³ . . .
With the spell of Agastya [Śiva], I bind the worms together.⁷⁴ . . .
And I break the head of all the male and female worms with a stone
and I burn the mouth with fire.⁷⁵

Thus, like the *mantrin* of the *tantric* literature, the *Atharvan* priest wields his power to free others from unwanted forces and beings. He also wields his power to bring others under his control or to otherwise harm or kill the enemy. In one verse, the priest recites, “I seize the minds with my mind . . . I bring your hearts under my dominion.”⁷⁶ And, in another, “With this oblation, I cut off the arms of the enemies.”⁷⁷ Therefore, although Indra and others are invoked to aid in the battle against diseases and enemies, it is often the actions, gestures, and words of the priest that effect that destruction.

⁷² AVŚ V.23.1-3.

⁷³ AVŚ V.23.9; Atri literally means ‘the devourer,’ Kaṇva is the name of an *Angiras ṛṣi* and Jamadagni a *Bhārgava ṛṣi*.

⁷⁴ AVŚ V.23.10.

⁷⁵ AVŚ V.23.13.

⁷⁶ AVŚ VI.94.2.

⁷⁷ AVŚ 6.65.2. Recited within a KauśS rite for victory over enemies (KauśS 14.7).

The use of ritual fire in *Atharvanic* rites also parallels the *tantric* ritual schema. Most *śrauta* rites are performed in relation to the three Vedic fires. However, much like the move from many priests to one, *Atharvanic* fire rituals often are performed into a single fire—a fire not designated as one of the three classic Vedic fires. For example, in certain healing rites detailed in the *KauśS*, it is prescribed that the ritual fire should be a ‘forest fire’ [29.29], a fire made from birds’ nests [29.27], or built on a mat of reeds floating on the water [29.30].⁷⁸ And, in a rite for Nirṛti, the goddess of destruction, a funeral fire is to be ‘kindled at night’ [15.1]. The *KauśS* rarely invokes any of the three Vedic fires⁷⁹ and there is only one verse where the three Vedic fires are mentioned together.⁸⁰ For that matter, the three prototypical Vedic fires rarely appear in the AVŚ, with *āhavanīya* appearing only three times. This parallels the use of a single ritual fire in *tantric* rites.

Therefore, many *tantric* ritual forms and technologies have antecedents in the AVŚ. As with the *tantric homa* fire sacrifices, rites in the AVŚ regularly employ a single fire and a single officiant (*atharvan* or *bhiṣaj*), who often is credited with wielding a power of his own, thus bringing about the ritual effect. Additionally, the AVŚ divides rites into the same threefold division of Buddhist *homa* rites—*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, and *abhicārika*.

Even more specific *Atharva Veda* precursors to *homa* rites can be found in the *Kalpas* belonging to the *Atharva Veda*, particularly in the *Mahāśāntikalpa* (circa

⁷⁸ For a discussion of these fires, see Karambelkar (1961), pg. 127.

⁷⁹ *Gārhapatya* is mentioned the most, appearing at least nine times; *āhavanīya* mentioned only once

⁸⁰ *teṣāṃ haraṇānupūrvam āhavanīyaṃ prathamam tato dakṣiṇāgniṃ tato gārhapatyam* [*KauśS* 11.1[80].22].

2nd-5th centuries),⁸¹ roughly contemporaneous with the Buddhist *Mātangi Sūtra* and the Chinese Mahāyāna texts translated by Bodhiruci. The *mahāsānti* ceremony detailed in this *kalpa* includes several elements found in later *tantric homa* rites, including the use of white and black garments, substances such as colored flowers, sesame oil, and poison and the belief that the burning of these substances will avert the evil effects of the *grahas*, which have the ability to seize one's mind.

The *Mahāsāntikalpa* (MK) records the *adbhūtamahāsānti* or 'great ceremony for averting the evil effects of omens & portents,' a rite that is also prescribed in most of the *Parīṣiṣṭas*.⁸² The *kalpa*, however, does not just record *sānti* rites, but also prescribes *puṣṭi* and *abhicāra* rites (equated in the text with left-handed, *savya*, rites). Within the liturgy, there is a color prescribed for each Nakṣatra. Flowers, garments, and ointment corresponding to the assigned color are to be given accordingly.⁸³ Although not yet paralleling the color associations associated with Mahāyāna *homa* rites, the MK associates colors for individual asterisms, such as red for the Kṛttikas; yellow for Puṣya, Śakra, and Vasus; white for Aditi, Soma, and Varuṇa; and black for Yama, Mūla, and Nirṛti.⁸⁴ Although not completely developed or parallel, the associations seem similar to the garment colors associated with Buddhist *homa*

⁸¹ See Modak (1993).

⁸² As interpreted by Bolling (1904), pg. 80. The *Mahāsānti* rite in the *Parīṣiṣṭas* usually must be preceded by 'a series of preliminary ceremonies for propitiation of various powers.'

⁸³ Accompanied by the recitation of AV IX.3.23-28; Bolling (1904), pg. 82.

⁸⁴ Bolling (1904), pg. 111.

rites—with red for *vaśya homa*, golden for *puṣṭi homa*, white for *śānti homa*, and black for *abhicāra homa*.⁸⁵

Some other general precursors of *tantric homa* rites can be located in the *Mahāśāntikalpa*, including the use of the following substances: yellow mustard plant [XXII.1], poisons [XX.5], and ground sesame [XV.1]. However, again, the associations of substances, colors, and actions are not clearly or consistently associated with the threefold division of *śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, and *abhicārika* fire rites.⁸⁶ Moreover, many prototypical elements of *tantric homa* rites have not yet been incorporated within the rites. For example, the *kuṇḍa* shapes, the burning of seeds, and the characteristic marks of fires do not yet appear in the MK. These attributes do, however, appear in the *Pariśiṣṭas*.

Homa in the AV Pariśiṣṭas

Of all the texts belonging to the *Atharva Veda*, the AV *Pariśiṣṭas* contain the most parallels to *tantric homa*. Again, given the difficulty with dating the *Pariśiṣṭas*, it may be impossible to argue influence from either direction. Most likely, the *homa* described in the *Pariśiṣṭas* and in the Buddhist and Hindu *tantras* represent overlapping and contemporaneous ritual developments. The *Pariśiṣṭas* contain both the threefold and fourfold division of rites that perfectly parallels *homa* in Mahāyāna

⁸⁵ As prescribed in the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*, (Skorupski, *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*, pgs. 68-73). It seems as if in the Chinese sources as well as the Atharvan texts, this is a development that occurs at various stages. Again, since the developments seem roughly contemporaneous, it is difficult to argue for influence from one to the other.

⁸⁶ Or the alternative fourfold division which adds *vaśya* rites.

texts. However, ritual categories also include the six magical rites associated with the *homa* of the Hindu *tantras*. Van den Bosch writes, “The rituals mentioned in it are qualified as *śāntika*, *abhicāra*, *uccāṭana*, *vaśyakarman*, *vidveṣa*, *pauṣṭika*, *vijayavāha*, *mārana*, *stambhana*, etc.”⁸⁷ The *Pariśiṣṭas*, though, are typically considered *Atharvanic* (not *tantric*) in character and “as a whole, are broader in their interests and come nearer to including the complete sphere of Atharvan topics than the *Kauśika Sūtra*, not to mention the *Vaitāna Sūtra*, or even both together.”⁸⁸ Thus, the *Pariśiṣṭas* represent the most cohesive and substantial bridge tying the ritual paradigms of the *Atharva Veda* to those found in Buddhist and Hindu *tantras*.

First, there are a number of grammatical and verbal correspondences between the texts. The *Pariśiṣṭas*, unlike early *Atharvanic* texts but similar to *tantric* literature, often employ the optative form of verbs, such as *homayet* [one should sacrifice], or *dhūpayet* [one should fumigate]. This characteristic is very prevalent throughout various Hindu *tantras* as well as in Buddhist *tantras*.⁸⁹ *Homayet* especially represents a verbal form that can be found nowhere in the early Sanskrit literature, even the AVŚ or *KauśS*. As previously mentioned, the preferred verbal form in the AVŚ and *KauśS* is the first person or third person indicative (i.e. “I offer,” or “he offers”). Other *Pariśiṣṭa* terminology that does not appear [or is very rare] in earlier *Atharvanic* literature but quite prevalent in Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* texts include the following: *homa*, *kuṇḍa*, *koṭihoma*, *jvalaḥ* [sacrificial

⁸⁷ Van den Bosch (1978), pg. 6.

⁸⁸ Modak (1993), pg. 194.

⁸⁹ At least in those Buddhist *tantras* for which there exists an extant Sanskrit version, such as the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana*

flame], *maṇḍala*, *abhiṣeka*, *sarṣapa*, *sādhaka/sādhana*, and the *mantric* words *hūṃ* and *phaṭ*. The common nomenclature indicates not only verbal but also liturgical commonalities between the ritual frames of the *Parīṣiṣṭas* and *tantras*.

Again, some of the above terms do occasionally appear in the earlier literature, but they seem to take on new meaning in the *Parīṣiṣṭas*. *Maṇḍala*, for example, is a term which not only becomes much more prevalent in the *Parīṣiṣṭas*, but also comes to be employed in a different manner. For example, fire (*śucis*) is installed in a *maṇḍala* [1.34.6] and *maṇḍalas* are produced for the planets (*grahas*) [52.7.3]. Likewise, *sādhana* does not appear in the *Ṛg Veda* in the sense of a rite or worship. In the *tantras*, *sādhana* represents the most oft invoked term for specific rites, including *homa*, prescribed for a *tantric* practitioner. It also seems to carry a similar specified meaning of required practice for particular groups in the *Parīṣiṣṭas* and often is associated with *homa*. For example, *homas* with a powdered substance (*cūrṇaiḥ*) are prescribed in the *sādhana* for subduing enemies (*vaiśasa sādhane*).⁹⁰ And, in the practice of reciting mantra (*mantra-sādhane*), it prescribes that one should sacrifice (*homayet*) wood from a funeral fire.⁹¹

Other *Parīṣiṣṭa* terms pertaining more directly to *homa* rites include names for particular substances, such as *sarṣapa* (mustard seeds), *mantric* words, such a

⁹⁰ AVParīś 36.7.4.

⁹¹ *śmaśāna-khaṭvāṅgamayīm homayen mantra-sādhane—Khaṭvāṅga*, originally a bedpost such as is found on a *carpai* used as funeral biers, later came to be applied to the skull topped rattle, a common tantric weapon.

hūṃ and *phaṭ*,⁹² as well as terms pertaining to the sacrificial fires such as *kuṇḍa* (fire pit) and *jvalaḥ* (sacrificial flame)—all common terms associated with various *tantric homa* rites that do not appear in other *Atharvanic* texts.

The substances burned in the *homa* rites of the *Pariśiṣṭas*, like those of the *tantras*, directly effect the result, or ‘fruit’, of the sacrifice. While substances are an important part of prototypical *śrauta* rites, it is the proper execution of the entire ritual, including the time performed, that represents the most important key to bringing about the desired result. Additionally, most *śrauta* oblations are comprised of the exact same substances—milk, ghee, cakes, rice and other grains. These substances are used in all the various ritual contexts, such as Full moon and New moon sacrifices [BaudhŚS I], *daśādhyāyika* [BaudhŚS III], *cāturmāsyas* [BaudhŚS V.], the *pravargya* rite [BaudhŚS IX], *rājasūya* [BaudhŚS XII], etc. In none of the BaudhŚS descriptions does there appear an explanation directly connecting the substances themselves to the desired result. In contradistinction, in the *homa* rites detailed in the *Pariśiṣṭas* and various *tantras*, the distinctive substances prescribed are intimately related to the desired result. For example, the catalogues of various *homa* rites in the *Mantramahodadhi* and *Śaradātilaka* compendia clearly demonstrate that various substances were an essential element in determining the outcome.⁹³ This association between substance and result is also clearly stated in the

⁹² *Hūṃ* and *phaṭ* do not appear at all in the early Vedic literature, including in the KauśS. *Phaṭ* particularly invokes the crackling sound emitted when seeds and such are burned. For example, the compound *phaṭkāra* should be translated as ‘crackling.’

⁹³ See discussion in Chapter Two.

Pariśiṣṭas: “In all the excellent homa rites the result [of the rite] depends upon the different substances.”⁹⁴

Moreover, many of the same substances are prescribed in both the rites of the *Pariśiṣṭas* and *tantras*. For example, unlike the rites of the AVŚ, *KauśS* and even the *kalpas*, the *Pariśiṣṭas* prescribe the burning mustard seeds (*sarṣapa*), most notably white mustard seeds (*gaurasarṣapa*) and black mustard seeds (*rājasarṣapa*). Also offered in *homa* rites are sesame seeds (*tila*), rice (*vrīhi*), barley grains (*yava*), and fuel sticks (*samidh*).⁹⁵

Finally, the shape of the fire-pits (*kuṇḍa*) and the characteristics of the fires comprise other key components in producing the desired result. In the beginning of the section pertaining to the characteristics of *kuṇḍa* (*kuṇḍalakṣaṇam*), the question is posed regarding the shape and orientation/direction (*diśi*) of fire pits that should be employed for particular desired results (*kuṇḍaṃ kasmin bhavet kīdrk kasyāṃ vā diśi kiṃ phalam*).⁹⁶ Not only does the use of *kuṇḍa* as fire pit (with the appropriate shapes) mirror *tantric* prescriptions, but the description of the fires and emotive sounds and colors of the fire does also.

⁹⁴ *Koṭihomeṣu sarveṣu dravyabhedāśrayaṃ phalam* [AV *Pariśiṣṭas*, 70.4.5]. All *Pariśiṣṭa* translations are my own. Note: *Koṭihoma* often is translated as ‘ten million oblations,’ but Monier Williams (citing *AVPariś*) simply translates it as ‘a kind of sacrificial offering’ (313). Since one meaning of *koṭi* is ‘excellent,’ the translation I offer seemed to make the most sense in this context, where *Koṭihoma* is used to refer to multiple specific *homas*.

⁹⁵ *Samidh* also are employed in most vedic rites, but in the *Pariśiṣṭas*, specific shapes, sizes, and characteristics of the *samidh* directly affect the result of the sacrifice (see *AVPariś* 26, transl. in von den Bosch (1978), pgs. 91-94).

⁹⁶ *AVPariś* 25.1.1.

First, the fourfold division of *homa* as found in Mahāyāna prescriptions is given as follows:

In all the [rites meant for] causing peace and prosperity (*sarvaśāntikaram*), a lotus shaped *kuṇḍa* is characteristic; and square in pacification (*śāntika*) rites. Then, in rites for prosperity (*pauṣṭika*), circular; triangular in *abhicāra*, and in rites for subjugation (*vaśya*), etc., in the shape of half-moon.⁹⁷

Then, further *kuṇḍa* prescriptions are given, such as, “six cornered [*kuṇḍa*] in rites for killing, etc. (*māraṇāḍau*), and octagonal in rites for exciting hatred or enmity (*vidveṣe*).”⁹⁸

Second, as in *tantric homa* rites, the colors and characteristics of the fire are also of central importance: “And in all the fire *homas* (*agnihomeṣu*), one should pay attention to the fire-types.”⁹⁹ Specifically, the text prescribes “It is established that one must examine the sound, color, smell, form, oiliness, radiance, movement and also the feel in the fire.”¹⁰⁰ Also, “the guru should be aware of the characteristics of the fuel sticks (*samidh*), the grasses (*kuśa*) and the colors of the fire.”¹⁰¹ Again, not only are various characteristics associated with different forms of *homa* rites, but the types of fires can help determine of the rite will be efficacious. For example, the fire

⁹⁷ AVPariś 25.1.10-11.

⁹⁸ AVPariś 25.1.11.

⁹⁹ AVPariś 24.1.3.

¹⁰⁰ *śabdaṃ varṇaṃ ca gandhaṃ ca rūpaṃ snehaṃ prabhāṃ gatim sparśaṃ cāpi parīkṣeta agnāv iti viniścayaḥ* (AVPariś 24.2.3).

¹⁰¹ AVPariś 24.2.1.

(*pāvaka*) will be conducive to success (*siddhakārah*) if it “rises up by itself”¹⁰² or if it sounds like “a bull, elephant, cloud, rapid stream, thunderbolt or kettledrum.”¹⁰³

Finally, in the *Parīśiṣṭas*, as in the *tantras*, the fire in *homa* serves a destructive function. For example, the *Parīśiṣṭas* declare that the *raudra homa* burns up and destroys all ‘sin’ or ‘evil’ (*pāpa*). Specifically, it is written, “Having performed the fierce homas (*raudrān homān*), he purifies himself with the sacred ashes from the conclusion [of that] homa.”¹⁰⁴ This action “causes the destruction of all evils (*sarvapāpa-praṇāśanam*).”¹⁰⁵ In fact, the ritual fire itself (*pāvaka*) is qualified as the destroyer of evil (*pāpanāśanaḥ*).¹⁰⁶ And, “from the performance of a *lakṣahoma* one annihilates all the sin that is acquired and even that which is unknown.”¹⁰⁷ The personal and individual nature of burning up/destroying *pāpam* parallels the employment of *homa* in Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* schools, where the burning of substances often is explained as burning up the faults (*pāpam*) of either the practitioner or another, such as his pupil (see Chapter Three).

Conclusion:

Therefore, even in the AVŚ, we find many ritual elements that characterize later *tantric homa* rites. Specifically, rites are divided into the three typical divisions

¹⁰² AVPariś 24.2.4.

¹⁰³ AVPariś 24.2.5.

¹⁰⁴ AVPariś 40.3.9.

¹⁰⁵ AVPariś 40.4.1.

¹⁰⁶ AVPariś 24.3.1.

¹⁰⁷ *avijñātāṃ ca yat pāpaṃ sahasā caiva yat kṛtam/ tat sarvaṃ lakṣahomasya karaṇād dhi vinaśyati* (AVPariś 30.2.10). Note: *lakṣahoma* is defined by Monier-Williams as a particular sacrifice to the planets.

Therefore, even in the AVŚ, we find many ritual elements that characterize later *tantric homa* rites. Specifically, rites are divided into the three typical divisions of *tantric homa* (*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, *abhicāra*), a single priest (*atharvan*, *bhiṣaj*) presides over most rituals, the practitioner/priest seems to wield a power of his own to combat and destroy demonic beings (as suggested by the first person voice), and the ritual fire serves a destructive rather than mediating function. These themes, largely shared across the broader Indo-Iranian context, continue and become even more developed in the later texts belonging to the *Atharva Veda*.

The later literature of the *Atharva Veda* contains many more specific references to *homa* and parallels much more closely the liturgical *homa* rites found in the *tantras* belonging to both Hindu and Buddhist schools. In portions of the *Parīṣiṣṭas*, some of the *homas* discussed include the *navagrahahoma* (propitiatory rite to the nine planets), the *pakṣahoma* (considered a modification of the *agnihotra*)¹⁰⁸, *sāyamhoma* (evening oblations)¹⁰⁹, and the *sarvanakṣatrahoma* (for all constellations of the stars).¹¹⁰ These and other rites discussed in the *Parīṣiṣṭas* share many ritual terms and forms with *tantric homa* rites including the fire-pits (*kuṇḍa*), the kindling-sticks (*samidh*), substances employed, gestures for one's hand when offering¹¹¹ and the categories of the rites. The passages cited above most likely

¹⁰⁸ 7.4-9.3; see Van den Bosch, pg. 43.

¹⁰⁹ 1.3.c.d; Ibid, pg. 44.

¹¹⁰ 24.1.2; Ibid, pg. 44 (also various colors of the fire are discussed in this passage).

¹¹¹ References cited by Van den Bosch (pg. 6) include the following: 21.3.2-3; 25.1.9-11; 26.3.3 ff.; 5.1 ff.; 27.1.2 f.; 28.2.1-3. Also, specific hand gestures prescribed in *Parīṣiṣṭas* chapter 28 are discussed on pgs. 105-109.

date from the late 7th – 15th c. CE end of the compilation of this corpus rather than being the source of the *tantric* data on *homa*.

When thinking about the Vedic origins of *homa* elements, therefore, it seems clear that the most parallels can be found in the *Atharva* branch of the Vedas. Since the early *Atharvanic* material demonstrates significant overlap with the Indo-Iranian paradigm, it would still be a mischaracterization (and oversimplification) to think of *tantric homa* as being strictly Atharva Vedic in origin. While certain elements can be traced to antiquity, other characteristics develop over time and through a complex process of cross-fertilization.

Chapter Five: *Battling Evil: Ritual Efficacy of Homa and Yasna*

The desire to defeat demons represents one of the most ancient, widespread, and enduring motives for engaging in sacrificial acts. Almost all ancient traditions had some sort of belief in demons and demonic causes of illness, maladies, and natural disasters. Ritual or sacrifice has long been interpreted as a means to battle, combat, or destroy these demons.

Battle against demonic forces also represents a primary meaning attributed to sacrifice by authors of both the Vedic *Samhitās* and Avestan *Gāthās*. Likewise, medieval texts reveal that *tantric homa* rites and the Zoroastrian *yasna* liturgy were practiced as a means to combat enemies, both external and internal. However, the demonological systems do not directly mirror each other. Just as *tantric* ritual technologies differ from the typical Vedic (*śrauta*) model, the demonological conceptions found in the *tantras* can be distinguished from Vedic systems of demonology. Though Vedic influences are found, we find more resemblances between the demons found in Buddhist and Hindu *tantras* and in Pahlavi Zoroastrian sources.

This chapter sets out to demonstrate that, although early Vedic and Avestan texts prescribe sacrifice as a means of combating demons, the efficacy and demonology associated with *tantric homa* rites develop due to a nexus of adstratal

influences present during a post-Vedic, Indo-Iranian milieu. In other words, many of the demonological conceptions associated with *tantric homa* rites should not be seen as a continuation of an unbroken Vedic tradition. Rather, they derive primarily from Indo-Iranian sources that originated in the regions of Gandhāra and Kashmir during the early part of the first millennium.

Enemies and Sacrifice in Early Vedic and Avestan Sources

Regarding sacrifice and demonology during the Vedic period, there exists some overlap, once again, between Sanskrit and Avestan sources. The shared terms and conventions that exist likely predate both the Avestan *Gāthās* and the Vedic *Samhitās* and, in all probability, were appropriated from an earlier Central Asian substratum. Witzel argues that terms found in both Vedic and Avestan sources (such as *yātu*) likely came from a common source (a Central Asian substratum); rather than being imported from one to the other or from PIE or Ilr sources.¹ Mary Boyce similarly speaks of the pre-Zoroastrian, pre-Vedic, ‘pagan’ background; from which she argues many of the shared terms/deities/concepts originate.² Likewise, Lubotsky attempts to reconstruct elements of a common, pre-Vedic, ‘Indo-Iranian’ substratum.³ In short, much has been hypothesized regarding the overlap between the Avestan and Vedic traditions, yet a great deal remains open to debate. The important point for the current project is that there clearly existed overlap between the early

¹ Witzel (2006).

² Boyce (1975 and 2001).

³ Lubotsky (2001).

traditions and that this overlap, by itself, does not account for similarities found in the later strata of literature (i.e. the *tantric* and Pahlavi literature). In other words, commonalities found in later texts are the result of continued contact and exchange between Indian and Iranian traditions.

Vedic sacrifice often was directed toward combating external, intangible forces that cause a variety of diseases and wreak havoc generally. The Vedic pantheon includes a variety hostile beings, personified demons, and hosts of other antagonistic forces—Vṛtra (Ahi), Nirṛti, Druv, *aratis*, *bhūtas*, *pretas*, etc. The RV and AV *Samhitās* reveal that sacrifices also were frequently directed towards human enemies—witches, sorcerers, rival wizards, liars, and opponents of righteousness. This pattern has a direct parallel in the Avestan tradition. The Avestan pantheon also includes groups of abstract, predominantly external demons and hostile forces—Azhi Dahaka⁴, Druj, Aeshma, Aka Manah, etc. And, also paralleling the Vedic paradigm, sacrifice most often was directed toward human enemies such as witches, wizards, rival sorcerers, and enemies of righteousness (*asha*). Though only a few demonological terms are attested in both textual traditions, it is in relation to the human enemies that we find the greatest conceptual overlap between the early Vedic and Avestan texts.

⁴ The Avestan Azhi Dahaka, like the Vedic Vṛtra (Ahi), is a three-headed snake/dragon; though Boyce (1975, pg. 90) contends that they do not directly parallel each other. She argues that Vṛtra (a late concept) is distinct in that he guards cosmic waters and is defeated by the gods.

Wizards

Wizards and sorcerers (termed *yātu* or *kavi*), to whom a large proportion of sacrifices are directed, held an ambiguous position in the early Avestan and Vedic traditions. Both terms likely entered these traditions from a proto-Indo-Iranian source. First, the term *kavi*, though generally used as an honorific term to designate a poet or an intelligent one, at times refers to sorcerer. In Iranian sources, some followers and patrons of Zoroaster bear the title of *kavi*. However, throughout the *Gāthās*, Zoroaster demonizes the *kavis*, who are perceived of as being hostile to his teachings. A verse in the *Hōm Yašt* calls upon *hoama* to help defeat *kavis* along with various beings, including *daevas*, *pairikas*, and *karpanas*.⁵ Boyce elaborates on the ambiguity of *kavis* in Iranian sources as follows:

In Zoroastrian tradition, except in one particular formula of execration, *kay* means 'king,' evidently because Kavi Vištāspa and his forbears, the 'kavis' par excellence, were princely rulers. Presumably the gift of prophecy, of mantic poetry, was hereditary in their family; but whether the Iranian *kavi* was ever also a priest, or whether as in Israel mantic prophecy was freely cultivated by men outside priesthood, there seems no means of knowing. It is perhaps significant, however, that Zoroaster, who was both priest and prophet, appears to have regarded the *kavis* as being of a different order, and described himself as *māthran*, one who revealed *māthras* rather than *kavyas*. Whatever the precise definition of their name, it seems probably that the *kavis* who set themselves against Zoroaster did so as 'wise men' who had their own apprehensions of the divine, and were not ready to accept his new and highly personal revelation.⁶

⁵ Yasna 9.18.

⁶ Boyce (1975), pg. 11-12.

Thus, although the term *kavi* in Old Iranian and Middle Persian does serve as an honorific title, it also represents a group of rival (probably pagan⁷) ‘wise men.’ Jean Kellens argues that *kavi* first was applied to an accursed class of priests and was only later made into an honorific.⁸

In the Vedas, *kavi* generally refers to a mantic poet, an intelligent man, or an inspired seer: “The word was used of men and gods, of Soma and the *soma*-priest; for the drinking of *soma* stimulate the shaping of *kavya*” [an ‘inspired utterance’ or ‘magically potent spell.’]⁹ And, paralleling the honorific usage of *kavi* as an Iranian family name, the Atharva Veda often employs the term to refer to a separate class of people, usually in the sense of a family name.¹⁰ In later medical and alchemical traditions, the term *kavi* refers to an Ayurvedic physician or an alchemical wizard.¹¹ Hence, while *kavi* retains the honorific meaning in the Vedic traditions,¹² it clearly

⁷ Ibid, pg. 106-7.

⁸ Kellens (1978), pg. 269-70.

⁹ Also, in the Vedas, as in the Yasna, *kavi* is sometimes interchangeable with the term *uśij*, in the former as a synonym for ‘wise man’, in the later, as a hostile person (Boyce, 1975, pg. 12). According to Monier-Williams, the root *uśat* (pres. p. of *vaś*) generates both *uśij* and *uśanas*, as in Kāvya Uśanas.

¹⁰ Regarding Vedic descriptions of the *kavis*, NK Singh writes, “The word *Kavi* seems to be used in the sense of family name (as *Usanas Kavya*) or as a wise person. The word occurs 40 times in the Atharva Veda. Here *Kavi* is treated in the sense of a family name, having the sense ‘intelligent person’. It seems there was a separate class of intelligent persons in the Vedic society called *Kavis*. . . *Agni* is a *Kavi* (5.12.1), so also are the *Maruts* (4.27.3). *Yama* is the *Kavi* of the *Pitrs* (18.3.63). The *Kavis* formed the seven boundaries or paths of the world (5.1.6). *Kavis* named the two daughters of *Kama* as *Vac* and *Viraj* (9.2.5). *Kavis* constructed a house (9.3.1). The wise and intelligent *Kavis* called *Risabha* (the sacrificial bull) as *Brihaspati* (9.4.8). *Kavis* fashioned a ladle to be used in sacrifice (6.47.3). The luminaries give light to a thousand *Kavis* (7.23.1). *Kavis* are skilled in a thousand ways. They protect the sun and to them the departed souls go (18.2.18). The *Kavis* by name *Arvanas* were benevolent and invoked in the assembly (18.3.19).” (Singh, 1997, pg. 197).

¹¹ White (1996), pg. 359 (footnote 49).

¹² Though Haug argues for the connection between *kavi* and *kava*, which is used to denote opponents of the ‘deva religion’ in the RVS. He reports that *kavasakha* is even called a *maghava*, a term that refers to the early disciples of Zarathushtra and attested also in the Gāthās (See Haug, 1885, pg. 291, 169).

comes to be associated with magical healing and wizardry. Though not always demonized or considered enemies, the term *kavi* did, in both Avestan and Vedic contexts represent a class of humans who were associated with magic spells and wizardry.

The term *yātu* (also Skt. *yātu-dhana* or Pahl. *yatuk-dinoih*) refers to witchcraft generally as well as to another class of human wizards. Both Avestan and Vedic sources prescribe sacrifices and charms to combat, repel, or otherwise defeat *yātus*, conceived of as a class of black magicians. Vedic sources suggest that *yātu* also refers to a particular evil spirit or shape shifter (at times taking the shape of birds, dogs, and hoofed animals¹³), but *yātu-dhanas* mainly represented a hostile or rival class of human magicians.

The Atharva Veda contains most of the Vedic references to the *yātus*, which are both male (*yātudhāna*) and female (*yātudhānī*). Along with prescribing *śāntika* (peaceful) magic, the Atharva Veda also prescribes hostile rituals, considered black witchcraft (*abhicāra* or *angirasaḥ*). Yet, the AVŚ consistently condemns the black magic (*kṛtyam*) performed by *yātudhānas* or *yātudhanīs* and employs many rites and charms to defeat these sorcerers: “Drive (*jahi*) the sorcerers (*yātudhānān*) away, push (*jahi*) away the one who performs black magic (*kṛtyākṛtaṃ*).”¹⁴ Often, the author seeks to defeat the *yātudhāna* by deflecting his own magic back upon him:

¹³ Shape shifting, in the Avesta, most often is attributed to *pairikas*; who also take the form of birds or dogs as well as appearing as enchanting women.

¹⁴ AVŚ 4.14.2 (*ava jahi yātudhānān ava kṛtyākṛtaṃ jahi*).

“Take the magic and, by the hand, lead it back to the sorcerer . . . Back upon the sorcerer let his sorcery fall . . . let sorcery roll back upon the sorcerer.”¹⁵

Yātudhāhas also frequently occur in a list of other enemies and noxious creatures to be combated, such as thieves, wolves, snakes, etc.¹⁶ That the *yātudhāna* was considered a rival magic man is clear in the next verse, where he is described as making roots and dealing in magic: “Throw the weapon (*vajra*), O mighty ones, back at the wizard (*yātudhāna*) who prepares roots and works in black magic.”¹⁷ Moreover, it was considered a grave insult to be accused, by false tongue, of being an *yātudhāna*.¹⁸

In the Avesta, the term *yātu* likewise refers to a rival sorcerer or a black magician. Since *yātu* most often is employed in a list of other human enemies—such as male and female *kayadhas* (evildoers), thieves and robbers, covenant breakers, ruffians, buriers of dead bodies, those who are jealous, the niggards, godless heretics and ‘evil tyrants among men,’¹⁹—the term predominantly represented human and not celestial or abstract enemies.

In the Avesta, *yātus* (*yatavo*) generally appear classed with the *pairikas*, a group of female sorceresses. Avestan verses demonstrate the sacrificers’ desire to

¹⁵ AVŚ 5.14.4-5 (*punaḥ kṛtyāṃ kṛtyākṛte hastagṛhyaparāṇaya . . . kṛtyāḥ santu kṛtyākṛte . . . kṛtyā kṛtyākṛtaṃ punaḥ*)

¹⁶ Cf. AVŚ 4.3.4 (*vyāghraṃ datvatāṃ vayāṃ prathamāṃ jambhayāmasi ād u ṣṭenam atho ahiṃ yātudhānam atho vṛkam*)

¹⁷ AVŚ 4.28.6 (*yaḥ kṛtyākṛn mūlakṛd yātudhāno nī tasmin dhattaṃ vajram ugrau*)

¹⁸ AVŚ 8.4.15 (*adhā sa vīrair daśābhir vi yūyā yo mā moghaṃ yātudhānety āha*)

¹⁹ Yasna 61.3 and 65.8.

oppose and defeat *yātus* and *pairikas*. For example, the Khorda Avesta makes it clear that sacrifice is the means to combat these beings as follows:

Offer up a sacrifice, O Spitama Zarathushtra! Unto this spring of mine, Ardvi Sura Anahita . . . Whom four horses carry, all white, of one and the same color, of the same blood, tall, crushing down the hates of all haters, of the Daevas and men, of the Yatus and Pairikas, of the oppressors, of the blind and of the deaf. For her brightness and glory, I will offer her a sacrifice.²⁰

And, again paralleling the Atharva Veda verses, *yātus* regularly appear within lists including noxious creatures and misbehaving humans, such as thieves and bandits:

He who offers up a sacrifice unto the undying, shining, swift-horsed Sun -- to withstand darkness, to withstand the Daevas born of darkness, to withstand the robbers and bandits, to withstand the Yatus and Pairikas, to withstand death that creeps in unseen -- offers it up to Ahura Mazda, offers it up to the Amesha-Spentas, offers it up to his own soul. He rejoices all the heavenly and worldly Yazatas, who offers up a sacrifice unto the undying, shining, swift-horsed Sun.²¹

Sacrifice again is the means to combat these rival wizards and demonnenses. The ritual specialist who ‘stands before/in front of’ (Skt. *purohitā*, Avestan *paradhata*) performs the sacrifice to ward of enemies such as the rival *yātus*:

To her [Ardvi Sura Anahita] did Haoshyangha, the Paradhata, offer up a sacrifice on the enclosure of the Hara, with a hundred male horses, a thousand oxen, and ten thousand lambs. He begged of her a boon, saying: ‘Grant me this, O good, most beneficent Ardvi Sura Anahita, that I may become the sovereign lord of all countries, of the Daevas and men, of the Yatus and Pairikas, of the oppressors, the blind and the deaf; and that I may smite down two thirds of the Daevas of Mazana and of the fiends of Varena.’ Ardvi Sura Anahita granted him that boon, as he was offering libations, giving gifts,

²⁰ Khorda Avesta 5:12-13.

²¹ Khorda Avesta 6.4.

sacrificing, and entreating that she would grant him that boon. For her brightness and glory, I will offer her a sacrifice.²²

Thus, *yātus* in both traditions referred to a group of rival sorcerers. Sacrifice served as the primary means to combat their evil work.

Witches

Besides referring to a group of sorcerers, *yātu* also means witchcraft in general and, in both Avestan and Vedic sources, frequently describes the mind of a female enemy or witch.

In the Avesta, *yātumaiti* (*yātu*-minded) serves as an epithet of Jahi, ‘the whore’, who later comes to be described as the evil Ahriman’s²³ consort. Jahi represents the personification of wickedness and is the leader of female witches. *Haoma* is called upon to hurl his mace against “the wicked human tyrant . . . the righteousness disturber, the unholy life-destroyer . . . and against the body of the harlot with her magic minds [*jahikayâi yātumaityâi*].”²⁴ And, along with smiting a long list of ailments and demonic forces (such as the evil eye, fever, slander, pride, *daevas*, *drujs*, etc.), the beneficent Asha-Vahišta smites Jahi, the witch “addicted to *yātu*.”²⁵ *Yātumaiti* (or *yātumatam*) also is a soubriquet for *zandam*, translated as

²² Khorda Avesta 5:20-23.

²³ Ahriman is the Pahlavi equivalent of the Avestan Angra Mainyu. He represents the personification of evil in Zoroastrian sources as well as being referred to as the chief (head) demon who commands a horde of demons to do his bidding.

²⁴ Yasna 9.32.

²⁵ *Ardibehišt Yašt*, II. 5-17; Darmesteter, *The Zend-Avesta*, pg. 45.

either a type of witch or a shameful wretch.²⁶ *Zan* also comes to mean ‘sorcerer’ in modern Gujarati, the mother language of many modern Parsis.

In the RVŚ, *yātumatī* (sorcery-minded) likewise serves as a synonym for witch (*yātudhānī*), though only one reference can be found: “O Maghavan, drive (*jahi*) away the bold desire of the sorcery minded (*yātumatī*) witches. Throw them into the ruins of a pit; into the rubbish of a big pit.”²⁷ The fact that *jahi* occurs with terms like *yātu*, *yātumatam*, and *maghavan*²⁸ offers further evidence that both texts drew upon a common substratum of demonological nomenclature.

Many other terms and concepts can be found that demonstrate early Indo-Iranian sacrifice often was directed towards witches. While Avestan *yātus* most often are coupled with *pairikas* (witches),²⁹ the female counterparts to Sanskrit *yātudhanas* are *yātudhanīs* or *arāyīs* (variously translated as demonesses, witches, hags, and sorceresses).

In the Atharva Veda, the *yātudhānī* and *arāyī* represent precursors to the concept of female seizers (*graha*) who prey primarily on children: “She who takes hold of children for the sake of stealing their blood, let her devour [her own] children. Let the *yātudhānī* devour her son, her descendent and indeed her whole

²⁶ Yasna 61.3. See also Pocock (1973), pg. 64.

²⁷ RVŚ 1.133.3 (*avāsāṃ maghavañ jahi śardho yātumatīnām vailasthānake armake mahāvailasthe armake*).

²⁸ Maghavan translates in Sanskrit as ‘one who possesses greatness/magnanimity.’ In Avestan, Magavan was a term used by Zoroaster to refer to his ‘fellowship of magnanimous ones’ and later is connected with the ‘Magi.’

²⁹ From the IE root *peri-*, ‘to enchant’, connected to English ‘fairy.’

fold. Thus, let both the wild haired *yātudhānīs* and *arāyīs* be destroyed and crushed.”³⁰

In a similar development, the Avestan *pairika* represent a precursor to the Middle Persian *pari* or *pariks* who, like the *grahas*, later develop into a class of female ‘seizers’ associated with the planets and other astral bodies (to be discussed further in the next section). In the early Avestan passages, *pairika* refers simply to a type of witch or enchantress.

Other Iranian names for witches seem to have had a particularly wide spreading influence on later traditions. For example, at least one Avestan term used to designate witch in later Sanskrit sources likely is an Iranian loan word. The Sanskrit varieties of the word *khārkhoda* (NT³¹)—*kākhorda* (*Survaṇaprabhāsaśūtra*³²), *kharkoda* (*Rājatarāṅginī*, v, 238), and *khārkoṭa* (*Caraka Samhitā*, vi, 23)³³—all refer to a specific kind of magic or sorcery. And, from the *Book of Spells of the Great Peacock* (first translated into Chinese in the third century)³⁴ it appears in a slightly variant form, *kaṅkhorda*, where it also refers to a type of sorcery. These various forms can further be connected to *khakhorna*, used as an epithet applied to *strī* (woman) in *Kharoṣṭhi* administrative documents dated to the third century, in which to be a *khakhorna* (“witch”) was considered a grave offence and punishable with death. *Khākhorda*, or *khakhorna*, has further been

³⁰ AVŚ 1.28.3-4 (*yā rasasya haraṇāya jātam ārebhe tokam attu sā| Putram attu yātudhānīḥ svasāram uta nāptyam| Adhā mitho vikeśyo vi ghnatāṃ yātudhānyo vi tṛhyantām arāyyaḥ*)

³¹ Sanderson (2005), pg. 290 (citing Kṣemarāja’s commentary on NT 19.79).

³² Where it appears alongside *vetāla*.

³³ All cited in Burrow (1935), pg. 781.

³⁴ Strickmann (2002), pg. 109.

traced to the Avestan *kax'areda* (Arm. *kaxard*) to designate a magician. Burrow concludes that, "The variety of forms in Skt. as well as the lateness of their appearance, suggests borrowing on the part of Skt. from Iranian."³⁵

Another term used to designate some sort of female witch in the early Zoroastrian literature is *jaini*, the source of the English word 'genie' and the precursor to the Islamic *jinns*.³⁶ Etymologically, *jaini* simply means 'woman,' but it comes to be associated with female spirits considered evil or malicious. According to Islamic sources, the *jinns* manifest in at least four forms—as a serpent, as a monstrous black dog, as a being with wings who can fly, and as a '*so'la*' that devours human beings.³⁷ The description has clear parallels to the Skt. *yātus* and Avestan *pairikas*, who also have the ability to take form as winged animals or dogs.

Jaini also appears in the Avesta as a verbal form derived from the root 'to destroy' or 'to slay' (Avestan *gan*, Skt *han*). For example, *jaini* appears in the following contexts: '*yat ažiš dahākō jaini*' (when Aži Dahākā was slain)³⁸ and in the Vendidad when Zarathushtra asks 'myriads of drops' from the clouds to destroy (*jaini*) sickness, death, etc.³⁹ Given the connection to the Avestan root *gan*, *jaini* may

³⁵ Burrow (1935), pg. 781.

³⁶ Although *jaini* is connected to the PIE *g_w_en* ('woman'), it most likely entered Islamic traditions via Iranian sources. Jaini also appears in the Avesta as a verbal form derived from the root 'to destroy' or 'to slay' (Avestan *gan*, Skt *han*). For example, in Yt. 19.92, *yat ažiš dahākō jaini* (when Aži Dahākā was slain) or, in the Vendidad when Zarathushtra asks 'myriads of drops' from the clouds to destroy (*jaini*) sickness, death, etc. (Vd. 21.2).

³⁷ Rose (2001), pg. 195.

³⁸ Yt. 19.92.

³⁹ Vd. 21.2.

also be a cognate of the Sanskrit *jigāṃsau* ('desirous of killing,' from skt. *han*), found in *tantric* nomenclature to describe *grahas* (seizers).⁴⁰

Therefore, though witches are considered enemies in early Sanskrit and Avestan literature, the Zoroastrian tradition seems to have been the source of several later conceptions across a wide variety of traditions.

Enemies of Righteousness

Besides the demonization of witches and wizards, the early Indo Iranian literature demonstrates similar conventions in dealing with enemies of righteousness, such as speakers of the lie or opposers of the ritual law.

Druh (Skt.) or *druj* (Av.)⁴¹ represents that which is most antithetical to truth, order, and the well being of the universe (*ṛta* or *asha*). The abstract, singular *Druh/Druj* refers to a personified demon or demonness, but there also are individual opposers of truth who, with their falsehood, seek to destroy *ṛta/asha*. Fire sacrifice again is the primary means to combat these human enemies of righteousness.

J. Pokorny identifies the PIE root of *druh/druj* as **dhreugh-* 'to deceive,' but Lubotsky claims it derives from the PIIr from **draugh-* also 'to deceive' with later derivative meanings to harm, lie or injure. Several idioms attest to the shared Indo-Iranian usage of *druh/druj* including the following: the destroyer of deceit (*druho-hanta/janta drujo*)⁴², betrayer/deceiver of a friend (*mitra-druh/mithro-drug*), and

⁴⁰ cf. NT 19.12.

⁴¹ On Avestan *druj*, see Kellens (1997).

⁴² Cf. RV 2.23.17 (*patirdruho hantā maha ṛtasya dhartari*) and Yašt 11.2 (*yo janta daewayl drujo*).

speakers of the lie or lying speech (*drogha-vāc/draogo-wā's*)⁴³. This concept exists in modern Hindi in the form of *drohī*, which means 'rebel,' 'enemy,' or 'traitor.'

A common literary convention associates enemies of righteousness with falsehood or with speakers of the lie. For example, in the Vedic *Samhitās*, Agni is called upon to help defeat the demon that injures the holy order (*ṛtam*) through his falsehood (*anṛtena*): "Oh, Agni, thrice let the fetter surround the demon who injures righteousness (*ṛtam*) with his deceit/falsehood (*anṛtena*)."⁴⁴ The two represent opposing ways of being. One who destroys deceit (*druho hantā*) is also a preserver of righteousness (*maha ṛtasya dhartari*).⁴⁵

In the Avesta, Druj (f. 'lie', 'deceit') represents the personified demon or demonness of the lie: "May the Righteous Order [*asha*] gain the victory over the Demon of the Lie [*drujem*]"⁴⁶ Possessors of *druj* (*dregvant*) are the liars who, through their falsehood, seek to destroy or thwart the defenders of righteousness (*ashavant*):

It is they, the liars [*dregvatō*], who destroy life [*jyōtūm*], who are mightily determined to deprive matron and master of the enjoyment of their heritage, in that they would prevent the righteous [*ashāunō*], O Mazda, from the Best Thought.⁴⁷

⁴³ Cf. RV 7.104.14, where the author asks for destruction to fall upon those who speak false words (*droghavācaste nirṛthaṃ sacantām*) and Yašt 3.9 where, due to healing words (*māthrō-baēshazō*), "The most lying words of falsehood fled away" (*draogo-wā's draojista jaini*).

⁴⁴ RV 10.87.11 (*triryātudhānaḥ prasitiṃ ta etv ṛtaṃ yo agne anṛtena hanti*)—also repeated in AVŚ.

⁴⁵ RV 2.23.17

⁴⁶ Yasna 60.5

⁴⁷ Yasna 32.11

As with rival wizards and witches, it is primarily via sacrifice that enemies of righteousness are combated. Specifically, the fire or light generated in sacrifice is conceived of as an agent of truth that burns up the falsehood or lie.

In the RV, it is the light of Atharva (*atharva jyotiṣā*) that destroys the enemy of righteousness or the speaker of falsehood.⁴⁸ And, in another verse, Maghavan is called upon to provide light in order to thwart the liar (*druho*).⁴⁹

Similarly, the Avesta relates that the righteous man speaks correctly “with the aid of brilliant fire.”⁵⁰ Fire itself, along with proper thought, is conceived of as the protector of *asha*: “when the Evil Spirit assailed the creation of Good Truth, Good Thought and Fire intervened.”⁵¹ In an analogous verse, fire and good thought are the protectors of individual humans as well as creation in general: “Whom, O Mazda, can one appoint as protector for one like me, when the Liar sets himself to injure me, other than Thy Fire and Thy Thought [*âthrascâ mananghascâ*]?⁵²

Therefore, although variances exist, early Indo Iranian sacrifice was practiced within a certain shared, cross-regional paradigm. Sacrifice served as a means to defeat or oppose rival wizards (*kavis* or *yātus*), witches (*yātudhānīs* or *pairikas*), and other enemies of righteousness (*druh/droga* or *druj/dregvant*).

Once again, it is probable, based upon Witzel’s analysis of loan words, that the earliest literature (the Avesta and Vedic *Samhitās*) developed out of a common

⁴⁸ RV 10.87.12 (*atharvavajjyotiṣā daivyena satyandhūrvantamacitaṃ nyoṣa*)

⁴⁹ RV 3.31.19 (*druho vi yāhi bahulā adeviḥ svaśca no maghavan sātaye dhāḥ*)

⁵⁰ Yasna 31.19

⁵¹ *Yāst* 13.77

⁵² Yasna 46.7

substratum rather than necessarily resulting from direct influence between the traditions. However, observable data from the first few centuries of the Common Era, suggests that adstratal influences (rather than a pre-existing substratum) helped shape emerging demonological systems.

Contact and exchange between Iran and India did not cease after the Vedic period, but continued to flourish for centuries. Adstratal influences permeated amongst multiple religious traditions, particularly during the centuries leading up to the medieval period. Under Sassanian and Kuṣāna rule (first to fifth centuries CE), the Indo Iranian regions of Kashmir and Gandhāra served as especially dense centers of intellectual contact and exchange.

Post-Vedic Demonology in the Indo-Iranian Landscape

It has oft been repeated that sacrifice came to be internalized in the post Vedic period. During the medieval period, there certainly was a move towards interiorization; attested in Buddhist and Hindu sources as well as Jain and Zoroastrian.⁵³ However, interiorized sacrifice did not replace external fire rites (after all, exoteric sacrifices continue to be widespread). Rather, internal sacrifice came to be practiced alongside, but not in place of, external rites.

The move towards interiorization did seem to have an effect, however, on the ritual efficacies associated with fire sacrifice. The efficacy attributed to both internal and external rites came to be understood in a more personal or ‘internal’ manner.

⁵³ On aspects of the interiorization of sacrifice in Zoroastrian tradition, see Panaino (2004).

Demonic forces came to be conceptualized as internal or moralistic weaknesses rather than independent, external agents. In other words, agonistic elements of sacrifice come to be expressed not just as natural disasters or maladies inflicted by external forces (including human enemies), but also in terms of abstract enemies that take the form of personal obstructions.

Though there exist conceptual and linguistic threads connecting the hostile or demonic forces found in medieval texts with those found in earlier literature, there appears to be a shift in emphasis. Whereas sacrifice in the Vedic *Samhitās* and Zoroastrian *Gāthās* served to combat external enemies that afflicted humans, apparently through no fault of their own, medieval texts (including various *tantras* and Pahlavi texts) emphasize more internal and individualized faults that lead one to be seized or otherwise afflicted by the pantheon of demonic beings desiring to do harm.

Given the difficulty with dating textual sources (medieval texts of all traditions often contain passages thought to be quite ancient), it may be impossible to trace the origin of many of the below conventions. However, it is sufficient for the present project to demonstrate that there was significant contact and exchange occurring during the first half of the first millennium. This observable contact and exchange furthers the argument that *tantric homa* rites, as well as related demonological conventions, developed more from a shared Indo-Iranian ritual paradigm rather than from an unbroken Vedic tradition.

In the centuries leading up to the medieval period, the regions surrounding Kashmir and Gandhāra first came under the control of the Kushans (first to third centuries), who brought a combination of Greek and Persian influences. Second, the region was dominated by the Kushano-Sassanians (third – fifth centuries)⁵⁴ whose state religion was Zoroastrianism.⁵⁵ Given the Iranian influence seen in art, archeology, and numismatic discoveries (including coins with bilingual inscriptions in Pahlavi and Sanskrit/Prakrit) in these regions,⁵⁶ it is not surprising that the textual traditions contain similar conceptions.

Far from being isolated developments, medieval Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Hindu texts were composed in pluralistic environments. Significant intellectual exchange is attested by translations of texts that appear during the second half of the millennium—texts like the *Pañcatantra* (a collection of animal tales likely compiled in Kashmir and translated into Pahlavi by a Persian physician during the sixth century),⁵⁷ and the *Suśruta* and *Cāraka Samhitās*, translated into Arabic and Persian in the eighth century. Avestan texts throughout the medieval period were also being translated into Sanskrit and often, when the original Pahlavi texts could not be discovered, Zoroastrian authors relied upon only the Pazand-Sanskrit versions⁵⁸ from

⁵⁴ The Sassanians again controlled Gandhāra for a brief period (568-644) after defeating the Huns until their fall in 644; at which time Gandhāra came to be ruled by Buddhist Turks.

⁵⁵ Although the form of Zoroastrianism practiced differed in significant ways from the Avestan accounts. Also, multiple religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and several varieties of Christianity, were practiced in the Sassanian controlled regions.

⁵⁶ For further discussion, see Chapter Three.

⁵⁷ See Claus, et al (2003), pg. 459 and Banerji (1989), pg. 596.

⁵⁸ Many of these texts (such as the *Dana-i-Menog-I* or the *Shikand-gumanic Vichar* as well as the entire *Yasna*) are translated into Pazand-Sanskrit during the twelfth century by Neryosang. It is also

which Gujarati translations could be made for Parsis who no longer understood the Pahlavi script. Post-Avestan Persian influence on Hinduism can also be seen in the re-importation of the cult of the sun god, called Mihira in Persian, Kushan, and Puranic sources.⁵⁹

Finally, other contemporaneous texts suggest that conventions were widely shared by other religious groups as well. For example, two Manichaean magical texts (contemporaneous with the circa fifth century Bower Manuscript) contain lists of hostile forces that very closely parallel Sanskrit, Persian, and Pāli accounts. The following represents one list pertaining to classes of demons cited: ‘my jailers are robbers, demons, *drujs* and all *peris*.’⁶⁰ Henning also discusses a Manichaean amulet, whose ‘chief content’ (in Parthian language) is Manichaean Yakṣa catalogue. This fragment, Henning writes, “is closely related to a type of Buddhist literature of which the Mahāmāyūrī and the Candragarbha-sūtra are the best known specimens.”⁶¹ It has been further noted that some Chinese documents dating to the Tang dynasty are Manichaean in character but combine Buddhist and Taoist ideas, thus demonstrating the exchange of religious ideas, particularly between Persian and Buddhist religions, during this time period.⁶²

In the late medieval period, some Muslim medical treatises include demonological accounts that resemble Hindu sources in concept (particularly

interesting to note that the ninth century Greater *Bundahišn* had both an Iranian and an Indian recension.

⁵⁹ See H. Humbach (1978).

⁶⁰ Henning (1947), pg. 46.

⁶¹ Ibid, pg. 48.

⁶² Puri (1987).

regarding malevolent beings who afflict children) but draw primarily upon terminology from Zoroastrian sources (i.e. *dīvs* and *peris*).⁶³ Hence, with this extensive contact and exchange amongst Indo-Iranian religious traditions over several centuries, it is not particularly surprising that texts compiled in the medieval period contain common conceptions regarding the demonifugic function sacrifice.

Efficacy of Homa and Yasna

Though *tantric* and Zoroastrian fire rituals, such as *homa* and *yasna*, are performed for a variety of purposes, the overwhelming function attributed to these sacrifices is that they serve as a demonifuge—an act to combat demonic forces. The concept of ritual serving as a means to battle demons is an ancient one. However, during the medieval period, texts belonging to various schools reiterate and expand upon the ways in which ritual space functions as a battleground. Though portions of these texts undoubtedly are much older, the medieval texts produced in the Indo-Iranian regions demonstrate clear commonalities between Zoroastrian and Buddhist/Hindu *tantric* ritual efficacy. Ritual performances, specifically *homa* and the *haoma* centered *yasna*, are the means by which humans either protect or heal themselves from the afflictions wrought by hordes of demonic beings, such as *māras*, *grahas*, and *dīvs*. The medieval Indo-Iranian ritual paradigm should not necessarily be seen as a further development of some ‘ancient’ tradition. Rather, the

⁶³ See Ivanow (1926). The text analyzed here, *Rahatu'l-insan* (‘The Comfort of Man’), was composed in India in 1376 C.E. and spread throughout Persia.

concept of ritual as a demonifuge should be seen as an innovative revival of an ancient concept.

Indo-Iranian ritual texts produced during the medieval centuries (roughly second–ninth centuries CE) contain similar conceptions of demonological afflictions and the role of ritual in combating these. Although appropriated into distinct ‘ritual universes’ (see Chapter Six), the overall conception of *how* demonic beings are averted through the practice of a Zoroastrian *yasna* or a *tantric homa* sacrifice is structurally very similar.

First, the actions and recitations of the priest are instrumental in the battle against evil for the *homa* rites as well as for the *yasna*. In *tantric homa* rites, *mantras* and *mudrās* are understood to manipulate divine and demonic beings. Regarding the purpose of *mantras* and *mudrās* in the Hindu context, Diehl posits that formulas (*mantras*) and syllables (*bījas*) hold the gods while they are directed by means of symbolic gestures (*mudrās*): “In that way the performer of the rites draws into himself the divine, whereby alone he becomes fit for worshipping.”⁶⁴

Similarly, Strickmann describes the mediating function of *mantras* and *mudrās* in the Buddhist *homa* as follows: “The officiant manipulates his otherworldly visitors using the Three Mysteries of body, speech, and mind—the hand-formed mudras, the murmured mantras, and the force of visualization.”⁶⁵

Mantras also frame the entire *yasna* liturgy and function to protect against demonic beings. Dastur Kotwal describes that the various invocations are recited,

⁶⁴ Diehl (1956), pg. 100.

⁶⁵ Strickmann (1983), pg. 434.

“so that the power and presence of the sacred word (*mānthra*) are ritually manifest and can serve as a shield against evil.”⁶⁶ Moreover, although *mudrās* per se are not practiced in the Zoroastrian *yasna*, the priest does perform multiple complex hand gestures intended to control demonic beings. For example, the rite prescribes particular ways in which the *barsom*⁶⁷ should be tied with accompanying *mantras*, exemplifying the literal binding of demons. In this way, the ritual body of the priest becomes an effective template for manipulating these forces.

In the *yasna* liturgy, the priest seeks to make the demonic forces ineffective, and thereby purify the good creation of Ahura Mazda, through *mantras*, offerings, and ritual gestures. Thus, ritual serves as a mesocosmic space, explained by Kotwal as follows: “The liturgy seeks to accomplish the inter-connection of all things good and beneficial in the *gētīg* and *mēnōg* realms, for the welfare of all.”⁶⁸ It is clear in the Zoroastrian context that the priest, by performing the *yasna*, directly participates in combating the various forms of Ahriman.

This paradigm seems to be the model for the efficacy attributed to the tantric *homa* rites. As Diehl has described, the Hindu tantric *homa* conceives of the various *nāḍis* of the practitioner’s body aligning with, or identifying with, those of the macrocosm—conceptualized as the ‘Śiva of the fire.’ Similarly, the Buddhist sources consistently and explicitly posit that the priest physically identifies with the deity or bodhisattva to whom the rite is directed. Strickmann writes that one core element of

⁶⁶ Kotwal & Boyd (1991), pg. 15.

⁶⁷ *Barsom* is bundle of wires that is understood to serve as a conduit between the macrocosmic realm of perfect forms (*mēnōg*) and microcosmic world that derives its existence from that realm (*gētīg*).

⁶⁸ Ibid, pg. 17.

the tantric *homa* is the visualization of the central deity “with whom the officiant then proceeds to identify himself or otherwise unite.”⁶⁹ Thus *homa*, like the *yasna*, serves as a mesocosmic location for identification with, or an opening to, the macrocosm (realm of the deity) and, subsequently, for the opportunity to directly avert multiple demons or defiling afflictions.

Regarding the demons targeted through fire sacrifice, we find significant parallels again between Buddhist, Hindu, and Zoroastrian medieval sources. Although nomenclature and theological interpretations vary across traditions, the demonological systems associated with sacrifice are conceptually very similar.

Ritual Battle against Māra in Buddhist Sources

An explicit purpose given to the performance of *homa* in the Buddhist *tantric* literature is that it wards off ills and misfortunes, which are innumerable and conceived of as multiple manifestations of the demon Māra. Strickmann describes the demonifugic function of the Buddhist *homa* in the following way:

We know that *śāntika*, i.e. the most popular among *homa* rites, was performed in order to fight ills, which are without number, comprising in the external world flood, fire, insects, hail, locusts, and all the other afflictions that devastate crops and cattle. Within the body itself, there are myriad forms of disease and distress.⁷⁰

The use of ritual to combat evil is quite common in Buddhist practice and certainly not limited to the *homa* rites. For example, Vesna Wallace discusses how the early

⁶⁹ Strickmann (1983), pg. 418.

⁷⁰ Strickmann (1983), pg. 434.

Buddhist literature demonstrates the belief in “powerful unseen deities inhabiting the world of men and capable of taking possession of men.”⁷¹ The texts prescribe ritual means to deal with these malevolent and wrathful deities, conceptualized as various *māras*.

On the one hand, Māra is a single, mythologized figure, not unlike the Satan figure of Christianity or Ahriman of Zoroastrianism. On the other hand, there are multiple *māras*. Wallace describes that the *māras* are understood in Buddhist texts to be both external and internal. Therefore, there is a need for external and internal rituals to battle the host of evil *māras* that prey on human bodies.⁷²

The development of the Māra demonology likely occurred primarily in the northwestern region near Gandhāra. Etymologically, *māra* corresponds with the Avestan word *mairya*, ‘murderous’⁷³, also used as an epithet for the ‘evil one’ or, in the plural, ‘evil ones.’⁷⁴ Parpola correlates Māra with the Kāfir god Imra, Vedic Yama, and the Avestan Yima. Fussman further argues that Māra legends appear in Buddhist texts only after Buddhism started to infiltrate the northwest regions such as Kāfiristān and Gandhāra.⁷⁵ While Parpola questions Fussman’s conclusion that the Māra literature was limited to this northwest region, it is clear that Māra was employed by Buddhists in the Indo-Iranian region as the primary way to

⁷¹ Wallace (2005), pg. 7.

⁷² Wallace (2005), pg. 8.

⁷³ In the Hom Yašt (Y 9.18), the author invokes *haoma* so that he may overwhelm the daevas, sorcerers, kavis, karpans and murderous (*mairya*) bipeds and in Y 10.15 the author renounces the murderous (*mairya*) woman. The Ashtra-mairya is a weapon yielded by an Atharvan (Vd. 18.4)

⁷⁴ From the Avestan/Sanskrit verbal root *mar-* ‘to die.’ See, especially, Khorda Avesta; i.e. Ohrmazd Yašt v. 10,29; Ardui Sur Bano Yašt (hymn to the waters), v. 50, where *mairya* is paired up with *yatus* and *pairikas*, and multiple other examples throughout the various *yašts*.

⁷⁵ Fussman (1977), pg. 48.

conceptualize evil or evil beings, much like the Avestan use of *mairya*. It is also known that in Gandhāra, *homa* particularly was performed as a means to avert the multiple forms of Māra.

There are several ways in which the *māras* came to be conceptualized in the form of personal faults or obstructions rather than merely as some outside force. The daughters of Māra include Craving (*rāga*), Aversion (*dveṣa*) and Delusion (*moha*)—terms that refer to the three faults that cause one to remain in a state of ignorance. Māra himself is associated with the human faults of ignorance, temptation, and obstruction: “Māra connoted the evil intent lurking in human hearts that obscures truth and hinders enlightenment.”⁷⁶

In Chinese Buddhism, Māra kings (*mo-weng*) appear as various temptations that test the determination of adepts seeking truth. The *mo-weng* comes to be incorporated into several fifth century messianic movements in Taoist and other Chinese religious traditions. The messianic movements, which included eschatological narratives (the end of world signalled by an apocalyptic deluge) and ethical polarizations (the righteous will survive while the wicked are swept away) similar to the Zoroastrian type,⁷⁷ almost certainly arose due to influence from the Persian traditions that infiltrated China during this time. However, much of the influence likely entered China via Manichaeism⁷⁸ rather than Zoroastrian. Several Manichaean texts have been found at Dunhuang caves alongside several

⁷⁶ Von Glahn (2004), pg. 73.

⁷⁷ See Strickmann (2002), pp. 58-621

⁷⁸ An Iranian Gnostic tradition that arose during the Sassanian period based upon the teachings of the prophet Mani (210-276).

early depictions of demons.⁷⁹ In one such text, the *mo-weng* ('demon kings') and *mo-mu* ('demon mothers') are lead by the head Demon (*mo-wang*).⁸⁰ And, in an early Manichaean spell, several demons of mixed Indian and Iranian origin are to be destroyed by the Savior: "In your name, by your will, at your command, and through your power, Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Mar Mani the Saviour, the apostle of the gods and in the name of your Holy, praised, blessed Spirit, who smites all demons and powers of darkness . . . *yakṣas*, *peris*, *drujs*, *rākṣasas*, idols of darkness, and spirits of evil . . . "⁸¹

The conception of *mo-weng* in the fifth century Chinese context differs from earlier Taoist writings in that the hordes of *mo-weng* do not seek blameless mortals but afflict those who have somehow 'earned' or, rather, deserved the affliction:

In contrast to the 'annals of the strange,' in which wandering ghosts are likely to seek out blameless mortals, Daoist religion [in the fifth century] placed the onus for demonic affliction squarely on the victim . . . The messianic movements [in Chinese Daoism and Buddhism] attributed the calamities besetting China, especially the ravages of war and epidemic, to the work of demon-kings (literally, 'Māra-kings,' *mowing*) and their henchmen . . . only the devout faithful, the 'elect' (*zhongmin*), will survive and enjoy the era of Great Peace under the rule of the messiah.⁸²

Therefore, although originating in the Indo-Iranian regions, the *māra*-centered demonology comes to be incorporated into Buddhist traditions across Asia. Again,

⁷⁹ Lieu (1998), pg. 10.

⁸⁰ Lieu (1997).

⁸¹ Henning (1947), pg. 51.

⁸² Ibid, pg. 74.

homa sacrifices in Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan *tantric* contexts function as an effective means to combat or appease the malicious *māras* or *māra*-kings.

Grahas and Sacrifice in Hindu Tantra

The Hindu *tantric* material also depicts the demon-fighting function of *homa*. Diehl accounts for this ritual efficacy of *homa* as follows: “Evil is averted through the observance of the rites, and their neglect would spell disaster. Taken together they form a safe conduit for the stream of life in its daily functions.”⁸³ The Kashmiri literature supports this interpretation of *homa* and describes evil in a manner that parallels the Buddhist conceptualization of evil. Like *māras* depicted in the Buddhist texts, evil is conceptualized as multiple internal and external afflictions that should be combated by ritual means.

In the Kashmiri *Netra Tantra*, Chapter 19 gives detailed descriptions of multiple *grahas* (seizers). This chapter tells us that these demonic beings have manifold forms; they are endless and exceedingly strong (NT 19:8).⁸⁴ In former ages, they sprung up together by the thousands; [each with] distinct births: ‘Everywhere and at all times there are ferocious, injurious ones wishing to kill’ (NT 19:12). Verse 19 tells us how the *grahas*, or seizers, afflict the human world: ‘Since then, the world, the animate and inanimate, having been attacked; the totality [including] the animal, the human, and the divine, is afflicted by all of them’ (NT 19:22). The

⁸³ Diehl (1956), pg. 92.

⁸⁴ Shāstrī (1939). All *Netra Tantra* translations are my own.

grahas have their own particular marks (*lakṣanam*), as do the humans whom they seize.

As with *māras*, the *grahas* target not blameless victims, but those who have ‘opened’ themselves to the *grahas* through their actions or thoughts. The *Netra Tantra* states that the *grahas* are especially fond of seizing the ill-behaved; ‘with their many pathologies, oh Devi, they are fond of smiting human victims; the ill-behaved, the evil natured, the impure [and] the vilest of men.’⁸⁵

Ritual, particularly the *homa* sacrifice, serves as the means for averting the evil eye and protecting from the manifold wicked beings. For example, in his commentary on the *Netra Tantra*, Kṣemarāja identifies the injunctions required when children are seized by children-seizers and women are seized by pleasure-seizers as ‘the *homa* worship, combined with mantra, etc.’ (*purvoktavidhiriha mantrena arcāhomādi*).⁸⁶ Then, according to the text, as a result of completing the *homa* to Kārtikeya, the child-seizers release their victims quickly (*ksipram tāsca pramuncanti skandādyā ye sisugrahāḥ*).⁸⁷

The *grahas* of the NT have precedence in the Skanda-seizers depicted in the MBh, where Skanda seizers are divided into male youths, female maidens, and

⁸⁵ NT 19:34.

⁸⁶ NT: 19:79.

⁸⁷ NT:19:79.

female mothers.⁸⁸ Etymologically, *graha* can be compared to the Avestan *grab-* "to take, seize" as in Yasna 31.8: 'when I grasped thee with my eye.'

Although Vedic texts mention *grahī* (as seizure) and often refers to Varuna as a *graha*,⁸⁹ the conception of multiple (usually nine) Skanda-seizers (*navagrahas*) becomes fully developed first in the MBh account. The worship of the *navagrahas* as heavenly bodies (for example, via *homa*) comes much later than this, only emerging "in the middle of the first millennium of the common era, in the wake of the importation of Greek astronomical knowledge to India."⁹⁰ This latter development seems to parallel the evolution of *pairikas* in the Zoroastrian tradition (see below) and likely served as the model for the *navagraha-homa* found in Chinese sources.

Demons and Sacrifice in Pahlavi Literature

Nowhere is the battle between good and evil so clear as it is in Zoroastrian accounts. Although the earliest Avestan texts attest to the dualistic nature of Zoroastrian theology, it is in the *Yašts*⁹¹ and, especially, later Pahlavi texts that the mythology of Ahriman becomes fully developed.

⁸⁸ "We are reminded here of the lists, already found in a variety of Kushan- and Gupta-age textual sources, of the host of semi divine or semi demonic beings of the Indian universe" (White, 2003, pg. 48).

⁸⁹ For example, Varuna is the *graha* who 'seizes the sick man' [TS II.3.11.1; V.2.1.3; AB VII.15], 'seeks after creatures. . . seizing on them' [ŠB II.3.2.10], seizes the sacrificers' children [TS VI.6.54], and 'seizes him who is seized by the evil one' [ŠB XII.7.2.18]. (Citations from Snodgrass 1985, pg. 310. Also shown here is a picture of Varuna holding his noose in a Japanese drawing.)

⁹⁰ White (2003), pg. 60.

⁹¹ Portions of the *Yašts* are believed to pre-date the *Gāthās*, but the mythology of Ahriman, not attested in the *Gāthās*, likely is added much later.

Ahriman represents the head (*kameredha* or *kamârikân*) of evil beings that sends forth his minions (*dîvs*) to do his evil bidding. Ahriman and the *dîvs* are the source of all that is destructive or impure. Medieval Pahlavi texts postulate that ritual serves as a weapon against the ills and destruction wrought by Ahriman and his multiple *dîvs*:

All the sacred ceremonies of the distant earth (*bum*), the light, the abundant rains, and the good angels vanquish and smite the wizards and witches who rush about below them, and struggle to perplex by injury to the creatures; they make all such assailants become fugitives.⁹²

The ninth-century *Greater Bundahišn* posits that the spiritual *yazads* ('angels' or 'immortals' invoked in ritual practice) serve as the weapon against the multiple *dîvs* that afflict humankind. The *yazads* are the protection against defiling substances cast by the wicked *dîvs*, such as the *nasas* and the evil eye. Destruction of the *dîvs* (who prefer desolate abodes) "comes to them from the spiritual *Yazads*."⁹³

Chapter Twenty-Seven of the *Greater Bundahišn* is devoted to describing the wicked '*dîvs*' (also '*devs*' or '*drujs*') and how to identify them in the bodies of men. These *dîvs*, like the *māras* and *grahas*, mingle with the bodies of men and carry specific signs or tokens. For example, Araska is 'the *druj* of revengefulness and of the evil eye.'⁹⁴ Nas is 'that which causes the pollution and contamination which they call 'nasâ,'⁹⁵ and Indra is he who 'freezes the minds of the creatures from practising

⁹² Dadestan-i Denig, 37.32.

⁹³ GBd. 28:19.

⁹⁴ G.Bd27:16.

⁹⁵ G.Bd27:37.

righteousness.’⁹⁶ As with Ahriman generally, these *dīvs* are understood to be defiling substances that alight upon material creation. The demonology of the *dīvs* offers an explanation for all the evil and disease in the world as well as in individuals. As depicted in the *Bundahišn*, ‘evil’ takes multiple forms:

Many ‘*dīvs*’ and ‘*drujs*’ are cooperators with each one of these, the declaration of whose details is long; one mentions even nameless ‘*dīvs*’ in large number: those ‘*dīvs*’ having the strength of pestilence and disease, producers of pain and grief, possessing their own weapons, of the seed of darkness, and bringers of stench, defilement, and vileness, who are many, large in number, and of immense details, a portion of them all is mingled in the bodies of men, and their tokens are clear to men.⁹⁷

Verse 51 offers an explanation for *how* the wicked *dīvs* ‘mingle’ with humans:

‘Various new ‘*dīvs*’ are those who spring on to the creatures, ever and anon, out of the sins which they commit’. So, the ‘sins’ committed by humans create an opening through which the various, innumerable *dīvs* can oppress the body. These *dīv-ik* agents are responsible for the obstructions that lead to disease and violence in the world as well as in human bodies. In this way, the macrocosm, which consists of a mixture of pure and ‘*dīv-ik*’ substances, is mirrored in the individual human body:

Just as when the ‘*dīvs*’ obstruct the passages of the wind in the world, earthquake occurs, when the wind of sin remains in the veins of man, becomes violent, and does not give passage to the wind of life, that spot too catches disease and causes the body to shiver and tremble. There are other growths of sin in the body also, just like other ‘*dīv*’-ik growths that are in the world.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ G.Bd27:6.

⁹⁷ G.Bd27:46

⁹⁸ G.Bd27:13-14

Conceptually similar to the *grahas*, the *pairikas* (or *pariks*) represent a group of female *dīvs* that are also to be combated by ritual practice. Although commonly referred to as a group of witches or fairies in the early Avestan literature (generally coupled with *yātus* or *jainis*), it is in the medieval literature that they, like the *grahas*, come to be particularly associated with the planets. “This idea of considering the planets and comets and meteors as belonging to the class of the Evil Spirit seems to be a later one. It does not seem to be early Avestaic.”⁹⁹ Likely, these ‘new’ astrological developments, which associate the planets with evil, have their source in Babylonian astrology, which had widespread influence across Asia during this time.¹⁰⁰

On a cosmic level, the planets and other moving celestial bodies, come to be understood as creations of Ahriman, sent to disfigure the celestial sphere (*bhagân*):

And, afterwards, he (the evil spirit) came to fire, and he mingled smoke and darkness with it. The planets, with many demons, dashed against the *celestial* sphere, and they mixed the constellations; and the whole creation was as disfigured as though fire disfigured every place and smoke arose over it.¹⁰¹

In the Pahlavi texts, the planets themselves are referred to as witches (*pairiks*) who spoil or defile the divinities. “The *celestial* sphere is the place of the divinities (*baghân*), who are the distributors of happiness . . . And the forms of the seven

⁹⁹ Modi (1929), pg. 104.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this, see Inden (1992).

¹⁰¹ Bd. 3.24-25.

planets are witches who rush below them, despoilers who are antagonistic distributors.”¹⁰²

Modi offers an interpretation for how *pairikas* came to be associated with moving celestial bodies:

The reason, why the Sun, the Moon and the Fixed Stars are represented as belonging to the creations of the Good Spirit, and the planet and the comets and meteors to those of the Evil Spirit, seems to be this: What is orderly and systematic is said to move in the path of Asha, i.e., Righteousness and Order. What is disorderly and unsystematic is opposed to Asha and is said to move in the path of the Dravant, i.e., the wandering. Now ‘Planets’ as their very English word (from its Greek root signifying to ‘wander’) implies, are ‘wandering stars,’ as compared with the ‘fixed stars.’ So they are represented to belong to the class of the Evil Spirit.¹⁰³

Pairiks, like *grahas*, are known for seizing humans and causing a variety of afflictions and sufferings, as described in another ninth century Pahlavi text, the Dadestan-I Denig:

And they (the witches) overspread the light and glory of those luminaries, of whose bestowal of glory and their own diminution of it, moreover, for seizing the creatures, consist the pain, death, and original evil of the abode for the demon of demons. And those demons and original fiends, who are the heads and mighty ones of the demons.¹⁰⁴

Signaling a divergence from the early Avestan accounts, as well as an affinity with medieval *tantric* descriptions, the *pairiks* are especially fond of targeting those who have sinned. In response to a question regarding what happens to a person at the time

¹⁰² *Sikand-gûmânîk Vigâr*, IV:8-9 (translation by West, 1965).

¹⁰³ Modi (1929), pg. 104.

¹⁰⁴ Dadestan-I Denig, 37:56-57 (Translation by West, 1965).

of death, the response is that a handsome maiden (*kaniko*) accounts for the store of good works. And, by the witches (*pariko-chind*), “the sin and crime unatoned for (*atokhto*) come on to the account and are justly accounted for.”¹⁰⁵

The leader of the stars, either Tistrya (Sirius) or Haptoiringa (Ursa Major), protect against the hordes of demons and demonnenses that oppose the celestial divinities. Haptoiringa is a gateway which averts the “nine, and ninety, and nine hundred, and nine thousand and nine myriad demons, and demonesses, and fairies (*Pairikas*) and sorcerers (*Yâtus*) who are in opposition to the celestial sphere and constellations.”¹⁰⁶

Sacrifices are offered to Haptoiringa and Tistrya in order to combat the hordes of demons. In perhaps the first Iranian textual witness for sacrifice to the Seven Luminaries,¹⁰⁷ we find *yâtus* and *pairikas* combated via offering sacrifice to celestial bodies: “I will sacrifice unto the stars Haptôiringa, to oppose the Yâtus and Pairikas.”¹⁰⁸ And, regarding Sirius: “We sacrifice unto Tistrya, the bright and glorious star, that afflicts the Pairikas, that vexes the Pairikas, who, in the shape of worm-stars fly.”¹⁰⁹

From the references quoted, we can see that the *dîvs*, like the *māras* and *grahas*, prey upon humans who, through their ‘sins,’ have created the openings by

¹⁰⁵ Dadestan-I Denig, 24:5.

¹⁰⁶ From Minokhired XLIX, 15. Cited in footnote of Darmesteter’s translation of *Tîr Yašt*, pg. 97.

¹⁰⁷ Chinese sources from the Tang period speak of both the *homa* sacrifice to the Seven Luminaries as well as *homa* to the nine planets or celestial bodies (*navagrahahoma*). It is my belief that the former represents Iranian influence and the latter, Indian. For details regarding both *homas*, see Orzech and Sanford (2000).

¹⁰⁸ *Tîr Yašt* VI.12.

¹⁰⁹ *Tîr Yašt*, V.8.

which the evil or malady enters. The *yazads* are commissioned by Ahura Mazda to fight the wicked *dēvs*. This fight occurs in the celestial and terrestrial realms as well as on the microcosmic level—in the bodies of humans. The ritual performance of *yasna* creates the possibility and place for the fight, or a fighting arena so to speak. As such, the fire altar serves as a mesocosmic template between the human (micro) and the superhuman (macro) levels.

Conclusion

Medieval texts belonging to Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Hindu schools all discuss the value of fire ritual to ward off demonic beings (*grahas*, *māras*, *dēvs*, or *drujs*) that mingle with humans and cause personal as well as cosmic afflictions. In the earlier texts, sacrifice was often directed towards external enemies who predominantly tormented innocent victims. By the time of the compilation of medieval texts, there seems to have been a shift in emphasis away from external, impersonal forces of evil toward personal, internal, and mental afflictions. This is not to say that Vedic demonology did not account for demonic possession or hostile forces otherwise invading the individual. In Vedic and Gāthic accounts, though, humans often are afflicted through no fault of their own but because they have been randomly targeted by demons, black magicians, or enemies of righteousness. In *tantric* and Pahlavi accounts, evil is understood to be a force that afflicts all of creation; but most significantly targets those who are impure through actions, thoughts, and deeds of their own. Since the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm, evil

in many ways must be considered a constituent of one's very being. Thus, evil must continually be combated by internal means as well as external.

The next chapter will engage the demonifugic meaning attributed to fire sacrifice. Far from being meaningless, fire sacrifice has long been understood to function as a battle against hostile forces in Central and South Asian traditions. Although 'evil' is conceptualized variously over time and across traditions, the demonifugic meaning of sacrifice has remained relatively constant for millennia. The sounds, gestures, intent, and overall performance of sacrificial rites continues to this day to provide meaning to billions of people across many Asian countries.

Chapter Six:

Burning Demons and Sprinkling Mantras: Fire and Water in Three Ritual Universes

This project has approached a specific ritual phenomenon—*homa* fire sacrifices—across a range of geographical regions and religious traditions. As such, it has utilized, to the extent possible, a wide variety of observable data to construct an historical map—a map that suggests certain threads of connections between fire sacrifices in Indo-Iranian and Asian traditions. The thrust of the argument has been that *tantric homa* rites did not develop strictly out of a Vedic sacrificial paradigm. Rather, *tantric homa* rites as prescribed in both Hindu and Buddhist schools incorporated elements from Iranian/Zoroastrian traditions as well. Underlying this argument is the methodological claim that religious traditions cannot be understood in isolation. All religions develop due to a multiplicity of appropriations, contacts, exchanges, and reactions that occur within wider cultural milieu at any given historical moment.

This chapter moves from an historical argument to a theoretical one. The relation between theory and practice is a complex one. Attempts to understand ritual are as old as religions themselves. Within the field of religious studies, several theories of sacrifice have been proposed.

Among ritual theorists, Frits Staal has become rather infamous for his ‘rules without meaning’ thesis. Although he makes many inter-related arguments, his

theory of ritual begins with the premise that ritual exists independently of religion. Ritual acts, including the syntactic rules governing rites, precede the layers of meaning applied by authors of religious texts. As such, Staal argues, ritual has no intrinsic, self-sustaining significance but only secondary, imposed meaning.

In this way, his argument mirrors J Z Smith's approach to methodology in Religious Studies. Smith argues that there exists no data for the study of religions. Rather, all we (as scholars) possess are maps—interpretive tools constructed to make sense of religious phenomena. Smith does not conclude, however, that we discard the enterprise. Since “maps are all we possess,” Smith really is arguing that scholars should be self aware that the maps they construct are just that—imposed, imagined maps. Maps are not, and never can be, territory.

Staal's argument is similar in that he argues theological meaning represents an interpretive map constructed by religious authorities in order to make sense of *a priori* practice. However, by concluding that rituals are thus meaningless, Staal's approach diminishes the significance of theological maps. The conclusion that maps [imposed theological meaning] are not territory [syntactic rules governing ritual] should not lead us to discard or avoid constructed maps. In fact, the comparison of theological maps (in the form of ‘ritual universes’) can serve as a valuable pool of data for enriching our understanding of distinct developments in the history of religions.

Staal's theory has been critiqued from a variety of angles, including the claim that ritual can only be understood when we consider wider social, political and

historical contexts [Grapard], that there is no evidence ritual or *mantras* ever existed in a ‘pure’ state, prior to meaning [Strenski], and that Staal himself inadvertently coupled the definition of ritual with religion [Mack].¹ However, critics often challenge his conclusions without engaging the most basic premise upon which his argument is made—namely, his source material.²

This chapter will argue that Staal’s meaninglessness thesis, based upon his study of the Vedic *agnicayana*, do not easily apply to many Asian fire sacrifices, including *tantric homa* rites and the Zoroastrian *yasna* liturgy. Next, this chapter will move beyond the specific example of *homa* to compare the ritual use of fire and water within three ‘ritual universes’—Vedic, Zoroastrian, and Tantric. Previous chapters have emphasized the similarities between Zoroastrian and Tantric fire sacrifices in order to demonstrate that they developed within a common, Indo-Iranian paradigm. This chapter, by drawing upon other paradigmatic rites, will engage differences between the traditions by contrasting the ways in which distinct ritual universes develop. Although certain syntactic rules, such as those governing the interplay of fire and water, remain relatively constant, these rules come to be appropriated in theologically specific ways.

¹ For these critiques on Staal, see *Religion* (1991) 21.

² Although Staal has been critiqued for using a recreation of the *agnicayana*, sponsored by himself in 1975, most scholars generally have not questioned that the ‘Vedic’ form of the *agnicayana* represents the best source material.

I put forth the following with a complete consciousness that these ritual universes represent ideal models – they are maps that draw upon a polythetic³ characterization of each. Thus, the comparison is not meant to be reductionist. Grand, hegemonic categories such as Tantric, Vedic, or Zoroastrian, are problematic but they have become so much a part of modern discourse that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discard them. The fact that individual practitioners identify themselves with such labels alone justifies a comparison of distinct theological worldviews within these broad categories.

The Meaning of Meaninglessness

It should be stated from the outset that I have no intention of dismissing or refuting Staal's work as a whole. Indeed, the fields of Indology and Ritual Studies, not to mention this very project, are deeply indebted to his valuable work on ritual generally and Vedic sacrifice specifically. In fact, I support the thrust of Staal's methodological concerns addressed in *Rules Without Meaning* and "The Meaninglessness of Ritual." That being said, I question whether his source material, Vedic *śrauta* rites, can be generalized to construct an overarching theory of ritual or, indeed, if such a theory is even possible.

³ Brooks (1991) similarly attempts to tentatively define Tantra by looking for a polythetic classification of Tantric phenomena (large number of properties shared by large number of members) instead of monothetic classification (i.e. a single differentia that exists to differentiate tantric and non-tantric).

Staal's works undeniably serve as a corrective to some of the misguided methodologies that have plagued the field of Religious Studies. For example, it has been noted by many that a Christian theological model has largely colored the treatment of Asian Religions in Western scholarship.⁴ Staal, in arguing that ritual should be studied independently (as syntactic rules) shakes loose the strong tendency to treat ritual as a mere accompaniment to religion—as actions and signs that signify something 'religious.' Staal, contrary to the scholarly tendency to study material within the context of particular religious traditions, points to several examples of ritual that exists without religion.⁵ He posits that ritual existed prior to religion and, due to ritual's emphasis on syntax, has retained its structure much more completely than theological and mythological meanings. Thus, this part of his thesis provides the groundwork for comparative projects, such as this one, that investigate shared ritual technologies in a manner not limited by the religious traditions into which they are later incorporated.⁶

There is good reason, however, why Staal has been one of the most widely criticized theorists. His ultimate conclusion that ritual is best understood as 'rules without meaning' is not only shocking but tends to dismiss emic values given to

⁴ As this point relates to Buddhology and Ritual Studies, see especially the works of Donald Lopez, Gregory Schopen, and J Z Smith. Also Mack (1991) treats this point in his review of Staal's book.

⁵ This fact can be seen most clearly in contemporary China, where all sorts of rituals are performed, in homes as well as at temples, but no semantic or religious explanation is given for the practices. In fact, almost every Chinese, when asked, will claim that 'there is no religion in China'. This perhaps reflects the post-Mao China but, at the same time, is very revealing about how 'Asian' traditions think about religion.

⁶ On this point, Grapard also "heartily endorses" Staal's implication that "we should change the academically accepted practice of divorcing Indology from Buddhology, or Shintology from Buddhology," etc. Grapard (1991), pg. 211.

ritual practices. To be fair, Staal is not saying that meaning, or value, is not attributed to specific rites but, rather, that the surplus of religious meanings that can be placed upon ritual render it, ultimately, as meaningless. In other words, 'multiple possible meanings' equates 'no intrinsic meaning.' Moreover, he argues that the meanings applied to ritual evolved much later and, hence, are not intrinsic to ritual practice itself. Again, his problem here is that his definition of 'meaning' remains vague and undefined.⁷ Surely 'meaning' must include some sense of value or purpose and, if it does, then ritual has been understood by practitioners to have a surplus of meaning; as evidenced by the fact that considerable time and care has been expended to preserve and maintain the rites over many centuries. Whether or not 'surplus of meaning' equates 'no-intrinsic meaning'⁸ seems beside the point. To argue such, as Staal does, is to place yet another grand theory, based upon Western categories, over the vast and often incongruous data that comprises 'Asian ritual.' His theory of meaninglessness serves as another way in which Western scholarship has attempted to 'think away'⁹ the inherent messiness of Asian practice.

In short, the proposal that ritual is best understood as *Rules Without Meaning* undermines the real world (not necessarily religious) worth ritual has for millions of Asian people. For example, the Japanese businessmen who line up, briefcases in

⁷ Staal defines meaning as a "concept that applies primarily to certain features of language, and only derivatively, or metaphorically, to other things" (1990, pg. 3). But, a central attribute of humans is that we are meaning makers and Staal still has no evidence that rituals were ever performed by humans prior to language and meaning making.

⁸ An argument, by the way, that could be applied also to myth, poetry, art and almost anything that involves interpretive polysemy.

⁹ See J Z Smith (1993), pg. 297.

hand, to sponsor a *pauṣṭika goma* rite in hopes of increasing their prosperity or the Parsi parents who bring a sick child to a fire temple in Mumbai in hopes of a cure, are not merely participating in a world of meaningless rules. Staal may counter that these rites are not ‘religious’ in nature in that they are not re-enactments of myth nor do they contain a one-to-one relation between symbol and referent. But, he goes too far in claiming that they then must be ‘meaningless.’ Staal cannot adequately explain *why* such rites have remained popular for so long in Asian cultures¹⁰ and he offers no evidence that these or any rites ever existed in ‘pure’ form, being practiced for their own sake and not for specific ends.

Regarding source material, Staal chose to study the *agnicayana* ceremony based upon the assumption that Vedic ritual represents “the oldest surviving ritual of mankind,” and thus provides “the best source material for a theory of ritual.”¹¹ But, by ‘Vedic’, he really means ‘*śrauta*’. While *śrauta* undoubtedly is considered ‘Vedic’, to be ‘Vedic’ is not necessarily to be ‘*śrauta*.’ Staal’s tendency to equate the two generates a false impression that ‘Vedic’ represents a definable and congruous category.

Even if we grant that the 1975 re-enactment of the *agnicayana* perfectly represented the ancient *śrauta* model, the *Śrautasūtra* version already represented a

¹⁰ Regarding the ‘real world’ application of ritual, Staal also seems to have missed the role that power and knowledge play in providing meaning to ritual. For example, Western culture certainly has rituals, with presiding authority figures, that govern business and places of healing (hospitals) but these rituals and ritual symbols are not even considered to be ‘religious’ in nature. Why is it that Western scholars are so quick to interpret Asian rituals, just because they often happen to be performed in temples, as ‘religious’ in nature while rituals in Western institutions are seen as rational, scientific or somehow necessary? On this point, see Grimes (1990).

¹¹ Staal (1979), pg. 2 and (1990), pg. 69.

highly evolved ritual model—a “priestly elaboration” within which several other, previously independent rites, were embedded.¹² Additionally, why should Staal start with *śrauta* rites, which are limited to ‘Hindu’ traditions in India, instead of looking to rituals that spread across time, regions, *and* religions? As an alternate starting point, I propose that the ritual field surrounding *homa* rites offers a much more comprehensive source material from which to construct a theory (or theories) of ritual. Not only are the central elements of *homa* sequences much more ancient than the elaborate *śrauta* rites, they are far more widespread and durable; being practiced widely throughout the world today by multiple religious groups. Unlike the elite *śrauta* rites, *homa* fire sacrifices comprise an essential element of lay religiosity and, thus, are much more mainstream than *śrauta* rites ever were.

Staal admits that studying rules from textual sources does not equate studying ritual. Regarding *tantric* practice specifically, he writes “it is the rituals themselves [not the texts] that need to be studied in the first place.”¹³ Since he advocates studying ritual itself, in practice, it seems that *homa* rites, which are easily observable in a variety of contexts, would be a better choice for Staal than observing the rarely practiced, Western-sponsored performances of the *agnicayana*. In short,

¹² Jamison and Witzel (1992). Staal himself also makes the point that “It is sophisticated and already the product of a long development. But it is the largest, most elaborate and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among the rituals of man” (1990, pg. 69) . He is, however, incorrect. Not only is it questionable that the *agnicayana* can be considered a “surviving ritual” (being practiced very rarely in the last few centuries) but it is not the “oldest surviving.” Rites such as the Zoroastrian *yasna* ceremony pre-date the *śrauta* rites and are practiced daily in fire temples throughout India and Iran.

¹³ Staal (1995), pg. 8.

homa encompasses a much wider field of practice than Vedic *śrauta* rites, such as the *agnicayana*, ever did.

The Mind and Meaning

Staal's source material, the elaborate *śrauta* ceremonies, produces a theory that is not easily applicable to other Asian ritual fields. In constructing his meaninglessness thesis, one of his main premises states that since ritual represents pure activity, "the important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or say."¹⁴ This claim, however, does not seem sustainable and examples can be found from a wide selection of Asian texts to demonstrate that mind (or mental activity) comprises an essential element of sacrificial performance. It is certainly not the case that, as Staal implies, the activities of early ritualists can be compared to non-human animals or that the earliest mantras (*bīja* mantras such as *him* or *stobhas* such as *bham*) can be characterized as "pre-human."¹⁵ While it is true that the sound of the *mantra* is emphasized over the meaning, it does not logically follow that it is 'not important what one thinks, believes, or says.' *Mantra* literally translates as 'instrument of thought'¹⁶ and multiple references can be found that demonstrate the mind (*manas*) should be active before, during, and after ritual performance.

Even the earliest textual evidence suggests that the human mind and subsequent mental dispositions are of utmost importance in ritual practice. An

¹⁴ Staal (1979), pg. 4.

¹⁵ Staal (1990), pg. 265-6.

¹⁶ Monier Williams, pg. 785.

Atharvanic *abhicāraka*¹⁷ hymn employed to counter the goddess of destruction (*Nirriti*) and other rivals, makes clear that the human mind (*manas*) is active within the ritual: “I push them away with [my] mind (*manasā*), away with [my] thoughts (*cittena*) and away with incantation (*brahmaṇa*).”¹⁸ Here, the mind (*manas*) and thoughts (*citta*) of the practitioner clearly comprises a portion of what makes the rite efficacious. And, in AVŚ 5.18.9, the mind (*manas*) is listed as a ritual weapon (*hetī*) along with sight, incantation (*brahman*), and austerities (*tapas*). In yet another verse the ritualist performs his practice (*kṛṇomi*) “with mind (*manasā*), with *homas* (*homair*), with fire (*harasā*), [and] with ghee (*ghṛtena*).”¹⁹ *Manas* clearly represent the bodily, human instrument of thought. In *Saṃkhya* philosophy, for example, it is generally listed as the fifth *tattva*, thus representing conscious, wakeful cognition, “the faculty or instrument through which thoughts enter.”²⁰ Unlike *ātman* or *puruṣa*, *manas* is perishable.

The Avesta also makes it clear that the human mind represents an essential aspect of ritual performance. The prelude to the *haoma* offering includes the recitation, “Here I give to you, O ye Bountiful Immortals! Sacrifice and homage with the mind (*manangha*), with words, deeds, and my entire person.” One is to perform *yasna* (sacrifice) “with thought, with word, with deed, with being, with the

¹⁷ The commentary in *Hymns of the Atharva Veda* refers to this verse as an *abhicāraka* hymn, pg. 92, 495.

¹⁸ AVŚ 3.6.8

¹⁹ AVŚ 6.93.2

²⁰ Monier-Williams, pg. 783.

very life of my body.”²¹ And, in the most sacred apotropaic charm for Zoroastrians, the *Ahuna Vairyo*, the mind, or ‘good thinking’ (*manangho*), represents the source from which the rules of actions stem.²² Finally, in the Zoroastrian creed (recited during the daily *kusti* ritual) the priest commits himself not only to proper action, but also to proper thought and speech: “I pledge myself to the well-thought thought (*humatem manô*), I pledge myself to the well-spoken word (*hûxtem vacô*), I pledge myself to the well-done action (*hvarshtem shyaothanem*).”²³

The importance of proper mental thoughts is further emphasized in Zoroastrianism by the names given to the most destructive of spirits in the *Gāthās*; namely Angra Mainyu (destructive mentality) and Aka Manah (evil mind). It is with full mental faculties that one chooses between good mind (Vohu Manah) and evil mind (Aka Manah).²⁴ Engaging in ritual acts represents a *conscious* (i.e. mental) choice to side with good in the ongoing battle against evil.

Tantric prescriptions for *homa* also emphasize the importance of the mind in ritual practice. Several accounts can be found to indicate that in the three categories of *homa* (*śāntika*, *pauṣṭika*, and *abhicāraka*), what the practitioner “thinks” is of primary importance. The *Susiddhikārasūtra*, a Buddhist text translated into Chinese in the eighth century, makes the connection between thoughts (or mental disposition), and ritual efficacy quite clear. Chapter fifteen details the *ābhicāra homa*

²¹ Recited in the introduction to *Yasna*, verse 5.

²² The Avesta contains several other derivatives of *man*, all referring to some form of ‘mental force.’

²³ Yasna 12.8 (translation from Insler but insertions in parentheses added by me).

²⁴ Vohu Manah is one of Ahura Mazda’s bountiful immortals and Aka Manah is a counter-creation of Angra Mainyu’s).

and stipulates that, instead of focusing on particulars such as time and date, the practitioner's mind should first of all espouse anger and angry thoughts:

Do not choose a [particular] time or day and do not practice abstinence—you should start when you are angry. If you do consider the time and day, [start] on the eight day or the fifteenth day of a dark [half-]month in the middle of the day or [at midnight], for at [this] time and on [these] days hosts of hosts of *piśā*[cas], demons, *bhūtas*, and *rākṣasas* gather in one place or roam about in different regions. If you perform the *ābhicāruka* [rite] at this time, wrathful thoughts will arise and it will be easy to gain success; various kinds of demons will help the reciter to increase his anger, and the deeds that he performs will be quickly successful.²⁵ . . . If you perform this rite to discipline a wicked person, your mind should be without anger and resentment [toward that person], you should possess great compassion and, concerned that he has been experiencing suffering for a long time because of his evil karma . . . you should perform this rite out of a desire to grant him eternal happiness—[therefore] you must generate thoughts of anger.²⁶

The text also repeatedly enjoins that ‘if your own (family) rites differ from this, then you should practice that’. In other words, it is not the specificity of substances, *mantras* and *mudrās* by themselves that make *homa* efficacious, but the fact that they are performed with the right frame of mind.

Similarly, the *Vajrabhairavatantra* prescribes that, in the three varieties of *homa*, the ritualist “should do [each] with an unwavering single-pointed mind . . . For pacifying with a pacifying mind; for increasing, [with a mind] apart from anger

²⁵ Giebel, 2001, pg. 183 (original text, 613b).

²⁶ Ibid, pg. 186 (614a).

and loving for control; [and] he does wrathful actions with a slaying mind, with an angry, hateful and very furious mind.”²⁷

In the Hindu *tantras*, one word used for cultivation of required mental state is ‘*vicintayet*’—the optative mode for “to think of, reflect upon, ponder, consider, etc.”²⁸—thus, clearly referring to a conscious, mental activity. In the prescriptions for an *abhicāraka homa*, for example, the *sādhaka* is to ‘think of (*vicintayet*) the victim (*sādhyaṃ*) as being red in color and as being afflicted and senseless.’²⁹ Again, the thoughts of the practitioner comprise an essential element of the rite. Creative visualizations, very common in *tantric* practice, put the force of the *sādhaka*’s mind behind the power generated in sacrifice to direct it, consciously, in a specific direction.

The *tantric* ritual practitioner must also be consciously aware (thus using mental faculties) of the various aspects of the rite (not just the rules) in order for it to be efficacious. The MVT states that if the practitioner is unaware of the particular characteristics of the fire, then the *homa* is not considered authentic: “Lord of Mysteries, in former times I performed *homa* deeds without knowing the nature of the various fires; This was not [true] *homa* practice, and I was unable to achieve any results from my actions.”³⁰

²⁷ Siklos (1996), pg. 61.

²⁸ Monier Williams, pg. 959.

²⁹ *sādhyaṃ tu sādhaś caiva raktavarṇaṃ vicintayet | homānte tu dhyāyet sādhyam vihvalaṃ ca sammūrchitaṃ* || VŚT verse 60; translation is my own but done in consultation with Goudriaan’s translation (1985, pg. 73, 155).

³⁰ MVT; Giebel (2005), pg. 215.

Therefore, in the early Atharvanic and Avestan contexts as well as in the later *tantric* ritual prescriptions, the mental disposition and thoughts of the ritual practitioner are essential to successfully accomplishing the rite. Staal's premise, which disregards the importance of intent and thoughts in ritual, clearly does not apply to all rites in South Asia and, since he offers no account of sacrifices that predate our earliest literary accounts, his argument becomes even shakier. In short, Staal's definition of 'meaning' as linguistic semantics is too narrow and, thus, not very useful for explaining Asian rituals.

Instead of dismissing meaning, the remainder of this chapter will seek to compare some meanings that have historically been applied to explain the syntactic rules that characterize Asian fire rituals. Specifically, it investigates the interplay between fire and water in paradigmatic rites found in Zoroastrian, Vedic, and Tantric contexts. In all three contexts, the basic syntactic rules governing fire and water remain constant. However, these rules come to be appropriated in a manner consistent with the larger theological worldview within which they are practiced.

Fire and Water in a Zoroastrian Ritual Universe

The meaning of particular rites should be situated within the 'ritual universe' (including historical and theological contexts) where they developed and continue to be practiced. Thus, in order to properly analyze the meaning of specific fire sacrifices, we must also consider the theological underpinnings and larger ritual

paradigms of each. Otherwise, as Davis argues, we will end up with a ‘one-legged’ study.

Ritual complexity has complicated the task of assigning any particular meaning to the *yasna* liturgy as a whole. As Michael Stausberg argues, Zoroastrian rituals need to be studied in context and not in isolation and, thus, Indian influences upon Parsi developments should not be ignored. Significant divergences exist between beliefs and practices in Iran versus in India, thus complicating the category ‘Zoroastrian.’ To take a current example, priestly practices like *yasna* (which show the greatest continuity with classical formulations) and *bāj dharnā* (consecration and ritual empowerment of priest) represent the most important rites in the Parsi community. In Iran, however, high liturgies like the *yasna* have almost disappeared entirely while Shrine worship and cults (completely non-existent amongst Parsis) are more popular than ever. Therefore, like the category ‘Vedic’, there is no central organizing principle for demarcating the Zoroastrian ritual universe. That being said, the following section will focus primarily on interpretations of Zoroastrian ritual as they developed within the Parsi community in India.

Parsi rituals, such as the *yasna*, have developed over the centuries into elaborate liturgies comprised of originally independent rites. Mary Boyce characterizes the *yasna* as a “changing constellation of ceremonies brought together somewhat arbitrarily.”³¹ Gladigow has similarly argued that the sequencing of

³¹ Boyce (1975), pg.158-60, 265-6.

independent rites has led to ritual complexity, yielding ritual ‘constellations.’³² Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible, to perfectly reconstruct the form or meaning of the *yasna*.

Nonetheless, certain syntactic rules seem to have remained constant in the performance of the *yasna*. The liturgy has a symmetrical structure or, in the words of Hintze, a “concentric compositional structure.”³³ At the exact center of the *yasna* liturgy, the heavenly fire is invited to merge with the ritual fire, addressed as Ahura Mazda’s most beautiful shape.³⁴ And, “from *that* moment of the ritual onwards, the worshippers believe themselves to be in the presence of Ahura Mazda, who has become visible to them in the form of the ritual fire before which they stand.”³⁵

William Darrow points out that, while fire stands at the center of the liturgy, the use of water frames this central moment. The officiating priest is required to perform a number of preliminary purifications with water in order to remove bodily and spiritual impurities. These preceding water purifications, similar to Vedic and *tantric* rites, are accompanied by *mantric* recitation.³⁶ The final act of the rite consists of pouring the *hōm* libation to the community well, thus infusing it with the water to be consumed by faithful Zoroastrians.

³² Gladigow (2004).

³³ Hintze (2004), pg. 293.

³⁴ Yasna 36.6. Hintze also points out that this moment is also located in the center of the *Yasna Haptanhaiti* text (recited in full during the rite).

³⁵ Hintze (2004), pg. 294.

³⁶ Recitation of *mantras*, incorporated into all Zoroastrian rites, generally is interpreted to have a purificatory function and, in this way, does not seem to differ radically from Vedic or *tantric* conceptions. Kotwal also points out that, like water, *mantras* frame independent ritual sequences.

Among the theories proposed to interpret the structural form of the *yasna*. Molé and Shaked have emphasized the eschatological meaning.³⁷ According to Zoroastrian belief, in the end of history the material world created by Ahura Mazda will not cease; it will be completely purified from evil and restored to its original, pure state. Specifically, the defilements of Ahriman will be washed away by a great flood of molten metal (melted from the mountains by Airyaman³⁸ and Ātar). This eschatological triumph will be inaugurated by the final *yasna* that Ahura Mazda will perform at the end of time.

To the righteous, the flood will feel like a river of warm milk, and they, along with Ahura Mazda's good creation, will be purified of all *daev-ic* corruptions. The *haoma* libation produced in the final *yasna*, consumed by all the righteous, will resurrect their bodies, transforming them into bodies that are as 'immortal as their souls.' The earth will also be restored after being purified of all Ahriman's defilements. Boyce explains, "Presumably it is through the offerings made to fire and water at this last divine service that the earth, already purged by the molten metal, will regain its original unchanging perfection."³⁹

Zoroastrians perform sacrifice (*yasna*) on earth in order to "evoke, to foreshadow and to anticipate the eschatological events of the *Frašēgird*, and in particular the Resurrection. In a sense, the *Yasna* ritual is expected to bring them

³⁷ Shaked writes, "The ritual of the *Yasna*, as it is set out in the Pahlavi texts, carries an enormous burden of significance and power, both symbolic and actual, representing, as it seems to do, primarily the eschatological notion of *frašēgird*, the Renovation of the World" (2004), pg. 342.

³⁸ Airyaman is the bountiful immortal of health and healing.

³⁹ Boyce (1975), pg. 244.

about, to actualize them.”⁴⁰ The performance of *yasna* both foreshadows the future *yasna* that signals renovation and re-creates the primordial sacrifice. The practice of *yasna*, then, functions to bring “forth to consciousness the intimate connection between creation and eschatology.”⁴¹

Syntactic rules, including ritual actions, that are consistent with the eschatological doctrine help illuminate how the *yasna* represents a microcosm of the Zoroastrian ritual universe. For example, Boyd and Kotwal discuss the significance and power of the connecting gestures found in the *yasna* liturgy:

By continually connecting the various liturgical instruments, the power of each ritual item is increased through its connection with every other item, and the universe that is present in this microcosm of the Yasna liturgy is advanced toward the goal of cosmic Rehabilitation.⁴²

The pouring of the *hōm* libation, following the central fire offering, signals the purification that will be realized in the *Frašēgird*.

Darrow argues that Zoroastrian eschatology alone, though an important and multifaceted point of reference for the interpretation of the *yasna*, does not adequately explain the meaning of particular ritual actions. I agree with Darrow in that it is difficult to satisfactorily correlate and explain the meaning of *yasna* with the eschatological narrative.⁴³ It seems to me that the *yasna* does not primarily function to foreshadow future events or re-create past events, but to construct present events.

⁴⁰ Shaked (2004), pg. 337.

⁴¹ Ibid, pg. 342.

⁴² Kotwal (1991), pg. 20.

⁴³ To be fair, Shaked recognizes that he is reconstructing the meaning of *yasna* from Pahlavi texts, not from actual practice.

The battle against evil, the triumph over Ahriman, does not merely exist in the past or in the future, but in the present, as an ongoing threat.⁴⁴ Thus, the purification of elements is intended to manipulate the phenomenal world in the present moment.

If there is no underlying narrative to the *yasna*, Darrow still wants to “recognize that there is a dramatic flow to the processual form.” He argues that the interplay between fire and water serves as a “useful heuristic device that reveals the overall dramatic unity of the *yasna*.”⁴⁵ He begins his analysis by characterizing the *yasna* as having a climactic structure that culminates in the final act of pouring the *hoama* libation into the community well. He elucidates a series of rules that govern the interplay between fire and water, arguing for contrasting ritual pairs. Water, evoked in the feminine plural, precedes *and* follows fire, exists on a horizontal plane, moves downward, is multi-local and is not contained. In contrast, fire, evoked in the masculine singular, moves upward on a vertical plane, is uni-local, and contained throughout the rite.

Though Darrow does a good job of illustrating the contrasting yet symbiotic relationship of water and fire, his analysis does not adequately engage the meanings invoked by these pairings. How, specifically, is fire understood to function within the rite? What role does water, which frames the rite, play? Again, these ritual actions, though consistent with eschatological narratives, are not merely symbolic or representative of some future or past event. Rather, the actions themselves *do*

⁴⁴ Shaked agrees that the *yasna*, which will no longer be necessary following the renovation, is practiced in the present for a “very specific purpose, that of combating evil” (2004), pg. 338.

⁴⁵ Darrow (1988), pg. 426.

something and, by extension, they *mean* something. Investigating the role of fire and water can help illuminate the meaning of ritual for practicing Zoroastrians.

First, Parsi rituals reveal a particular role attributed to fire. For Zoroastrians, it does not seem to be the case that fire is primarily a conveyer of oblations (as in *śrauta* conceptions) or the consumer/destroyer of impurities (as in *tantric* rites). Rather, fire in the Zoroastrian context *is* purity itself. The presence of that purity, actualized in time and space, serves as a means by which to ‘make holy’ the elements and thereby empower all of creation.

Ritual thus serves as a mesocosmic battleground, situated between the unmanifest *mēnōg* and the manifest *gētīg*. Within the *yasna*, the priest keeps continual bodily contact with the *barsom*, thereby keeping open the connecting link (*paywand*) between this finite *gētīg* world and the universal *mēnōg* realm. As Boyd and Kotwal explain, “the officiating priest, by maintaining continual contact with the *barsom* and invoking sacred *māntra*, becomes both the bestower and receiver of the powers and blessings conveyed through this sacramental channel.”⁴⁶

The entire creation of Ahura Mazda is, in essence, pure and undefiled. However, Zoroastrianism, a dualistic theology, affords Ahriman a real, metaphysical status.⁴⁷ Ahriman’s defiling presence across the good creation of Ahura Mazda is what necessitates purification. Though the pure creation of Ahura Mazda will prevail

⁴⁶ Kotwal (1991), pg. 19.

⁴⁷ For an overview of the debate concerning whether Zoroastrianism is dualistic or monotheistic, see Boyd and Crosby (1979). The thrust of their argument is that “Zoroastrianism combines cosmogonic dualism and eschatological monotheism in a manner unique to itself among the major religions of the world” (pg. 558).

in the future eschaton, Zoroastrians take an oath to consciously combat Ahriman in their thoughts, words, and actions throughout their lives. Ritual practice represents the most efficacious form of combating Ahriman. The religious duty of maintaining the ritual is expressed in the following litany, recited as a prelude for the *afrinagan* fire ritual:

May you be provided with proper fuel! May you be provided with proper incense! May you be provided with proper nourishment! May you be provided with proper upkeep! May you be maintained by one of full age! May you be maintained by one wise (in religion), O Fire, son of Ahura Mazda.

In order to be burning⁴⁸ in this house, in order to be ever burning in this house, in order to be blazing in this house, in order to be increasing in this house. Even throughout the Long Time, until the mighty Renovation, including the mighty, good Renovation.⁴⁹

Performance of the *yasna* facilitates the purging of Ahriman and his defiled creations. The priest, standing and acting in the presence of Ahura Mazda (exemplified in *Ātar*), empowers the good creation of Ahura Mazda as Ahura Mazda empowers him.

A shorter, but many ways comparable rite, *bāj dharnā*, likewise consecrates and purifies earthly elements by exposing them to *Ātar*. This rite, practiced many times a day in Parsi temples, is understood to empower priests and to bolster or ‘swell’ the power of *mantras* that will be recited in subsequent rites performed that

⁴⁸ Avestan *saoci*, cognate of Vedic *śocis*

⁴⁹ *Atash Niyayesh*, 8-9.

day. In fact, a priest must first perform the *bāj dharnā* for himself before being considered fit to perform it for others.

In the *bāj dharnā*, the following elements are consecrated, via *mantra* recitation, in front of a sacrificial flame: *Āp* (water used for cleansing and ritual tasting), *dron* (cakes or bread often pierced with nine holes), fruits and vegetables, *gōsada* (dairy product, usually ghee), and an egg (which represents the animal kingdom).⁵⁰ Again, the significant thing about this ritual is that Ātar, just by his presence, serves to purify the microcosm within which humans live and transact, at least within the ritual space.

The ritual use of water further reveals essential tenets within the Zoroastrian universe. Much attention has been given to the role of fire in ancient sacrifice. What has been comparatively underrepresented, however, is the function and meaning contained in the use of water. Water indeed comprises an essential element in Zoroastrian fire sacrifice. Based upon her studies of *haoma* ceremonies in India in the 1940's, Lady Drower pointed out that water has always played a prominent role in Parsi rituals being "at least coequal in sanctity with fire."⁵¹ She writes, "It is water which is the magic, regenerating, and purifying agent . . . ablutions, mimic revival by water, all the symbols of living vegetation, have nothing to do with fire."⁵²

In many Parsi rites, it is water, not fire, which represents the primary agent of purification. One such rite, the *barashnum*, purifies the body of all defilements. The

⁵⁰ cf. Karanjia (2004).

⁵¹ Drower (1944) pg. 75.

⁵² Ibid, pg. 81 and 89.

Vendidād prescribes that the ritualist ‘shalt sprinkle’ (*paiti-hiñcôish*)⁵³ the defiled man with water from head to toe. By systematically sprinkling body parts (starting with between the eyebrows and ending with the toes⁵⁴) the defiling demon *Druj Nasu* is driven downward out of the body until he flies away “to the regions of the north, in the shape of a raging fly.”⁵⁵ Sprinkled water (moving downward), combined with proper *mantric* recitation, drives *Druj Nasu* out of the body and, thus, is the leading element of purification.

Syntactic rules that govern the interplay of fire and water can be used to further develop the meaning of ritual in the Zoroastrian universe. For example, the downward flowing of ritual water exemplifies the how the purifying waters of Goddess Aredvi Anahita flow down from the mount *Haraitī* (f. ‘the guarding one’)⁵⁶ in thousands of streams:

All the shores around the Sea Vourukasha
Are in commotion,
The whole middle is bubbling up
When she flows forth to them,
When she streams forth to them,
Aredvi Sura Anahita.
To whom belong a thousand lakes,

⁵³ From *paiti-√ hic*; equivalent to Skt. *abhi-√ sic*.

⁵⁴ Specifically, it prescribes that one should besprinkle the body parts in the following order: between the eyebrows, the back of skull, jaws, right ear, left ear, right shoulder, left shoulder, right and left arm-pit, chest, back, right and left nipples, right and left ribs, hips, sexual parts, thighs, knees, legs, ankles, insteps, heels, soles, and toes.

⁵⁵ Vendidad, Fargard 9: 26.

⁵⁶ This mountain is known by many names, such as *Haraiti Bareza* or “the height Hukairya,” (*Aban Niyayesh*, verse 4). I have strong suspicion that this Mount *Haraitī*, “the bright mountain around which the many stars revolve, where come neither night nor darkness, no cold wind and no hot wind, no deathful sickness, no uncleanness made by the Daevas” (Mihir Yast xii., 50) , is connected to *Haritī*, the Buddhist Goddess who protects against disease and is represented in Gandhāra sculptures as surrounded by children. The feminine gender of Mount *Haraitī* is rare, as mountains in India and Iran generally are masculine and, though they have independent mythologies, it is common to see natural landmarks, such as rivers and lakes, develop into goddess cults.

To whom [belong] a thousand outlets. . .

And the outflow of this
One water of mine penetrates to all the seven zones. And (the
outflow) of this one water of mine
Flows continuously
Both summer and winter.⁵⁷

Just as Aredvi Anahita flows downward to purify all waters, ritual water pours down throughout the rite. For example, in order to consecrate ritual instruments, the priest pours water from his wrist down over items such as the small stone blocks, crescent-shaped stands, saucers, cups, and *barsom*.

Water flows, uncontained, continuously within the rite while fire remains contained. During the consecration of liturgical instruments, the vessel (*kahārmu*) and basin (*kundī*) that hold water are purified and consecrated by allowing the water to “overflow evenly on all sides.”⁵⁸ In preparing the ritual arena (*pāwi*), water is sprinkled over the whole area and particularly around the fire vase. Far from being contained, water overflows, sprinkles, and is poured forth at almost every stage of the liturgy. Fire, in contrast, remains contained within the fire vase (*āfrīngānyu*), elevated at the south end of the ritual area.

Another syntactic rule, the framing of fire sacrifice with water, reveals that water serves a purificatory role prior to its performance and regenerative, cooling role. At the center of the rite, Ahura Mazda merges with the ritual fire, thus opening

⁵⁷ *Aban Niyayesh*, verse 5-6.

⁵⁸ Each overflowing is accompanied by the Pazand phrase ‘the pure Varkash sea; Kotwal and Boyd (1991), pg. 68-9.

a conduit (*pawand*) to the luminous realm where he and the other righteous beings dwell. Water balances the intensity of the luminous.

Identified with the sun, Ahura Mazda has a luminous quality. The name Ahura derives from the Avestan word for sun, *hvar*, as does the term *khvarenah*, shining power or glory increased through ritual practice.⁵⁹ Thus, faithful Zoroastrians understand Ahura Mazda to be the ‘luminous’ source of the good creation; equated with purity itself. Often addressed as the son of Ahura Mazda (*âtarsh puthra ahurahe Mazda*), the sanctified ritual fire participates in the essence of the godhead himself. The designation of Ātar as the *puthra* of the godhead, instead of a creation given by him (*mazdadhâtahe*),⁶⁰ suggests that Ātar, unlike the other elements, shares in the same essence of Ahura Mazda. Thus, by standing in the presence of Ātar, the sanctified fire, the ritualist associates himself, mixes his consciousness with, the pure and luminous qualities of Ahura Mazda.

Divine beings (bountiful immortals) also have luminous quality. The *mēnōg* is the ‘star region’ where the ‘spirits of the righteous’ are compared to stars with ‘bright luminosity [that] spreads out of them.’⁶¹ The mesocomic ritual arena opens a

⁵⁹ *Khvarenah*, is iconographically depicted as a circular halo around the head of the King, a halo very similar to that of Christian saints. In the *Atash-Niyayesh*, the *khvarenah* is identified with the light of the sacred fire. White (2009, pg. 126-7) discusses the importation of the ‘ancient Iranian solar cult into South Asia’ as found in numismatic evidence as follows: “What we seen, then, is a progression in the transposition of symbols figured on the coinage of rulers from Inner Asia, whose realms extended from the eastern borders of the Parthian Empire down into the heart of the subcontinent. Solar rays, emanating from the heads of Persian *gods* on coins from the early first century BCE were transposed to the heads of *kings* some two centuries later, while the seated posture of *kings* as figured on coins from the early to mid-first century BCE was transposed onto figures of the *Buddha* or bodhisattva some two centuries later.”

⁶⁰ See *Atash Niyayesh*; Darmesteter (1882).

⁶¹ See Arda Viraf, Chapter 7 (Haug 1872).

conduit (*pawand*) to the luminous *mēnōg* realm. The luminous cleanses as it empowers, as seen in the *Khwarshed Niyayesh* (litany to the sun):

When the Sun rises up, purification comes to the earth made by Ahura, purification to the flowing waters, purification to the waters of the wells, purification to the water of the seas, purification to the water that is standing. Purification comes to the righteous creation, which is of the Beneficent Spirit.⁶²

Rituals such as *yasna* function as a practical tool for turning the mind and consciousness towards the radiance of the glorious immortals. Just as earth revolves around sun and the *yasna* revolves around fire so faithful Zoroastrians should revolve around the luminous.

When preceding fire offerings, water serves to prepare the ritual elements (including the arena, liturgical instruments, and the priest) for the encounter with the luminous. Prior to the *yasna* proper (after first bathing himself), a priest must make liturgical instruments pure and consecrated,⁶³ effected in three stages of increasing purity. In the first degree of purity (*ṣāf*) ritual instruments are “cleansed with fire ash and drawn well water.”⁶⁴ The second degree (*pāk*) is achieved by purifying the instruments with pure water from the well.⁶⁵ Finally, the instruments are ‘consecrated’ (*pāw*) with pure well water accompanied by the recitation of *mantras*. These three degrees of purification, enacted with the sprinkling of water, prepare the priest and his ritual elements for the sacrifice.

⁶² *Khwarshed Niyayesh*, verse 12.

⁶³ See also Boyce (1975), pg. 322.

⁶⁴ Kotwal (1991), pg. 67.

⁶⁵ Specifically with water drawn in the fourth draw (Ibid).

When following fire, water serves to make the burning presence of Ahura Mazda palpable; just as water in the atmosphere allows for the sun's heat to warm the earth without scorching it. Water represents a creation of Ahura Mazda (*mazdadhâtanām*) and, thus, while holy in and of itself, is not identified directly with the luminous sun. Rather, water interacts with and balances the effects of the sun.

After the direct contact with the luminous in the form of the ritual fire, water also serves to fertilize and nourish the elements. This regenerative function of water accounts for her association with femininity. Anahita, the divinity of the waters, is lauded as follows:

[She] who purifies the seed of all males.
Who purifies the wombs of all females for bearing.
Who makes all females have easy childbirth.
Who bestows on all females
Right (and) timely milk.⁶⁶

The *haoma* libation, infused with consecrated water (*zōhr*) and milk, likewise pours downward at the conclusion of the *yasna* in order to fertilize and empower all waters and all of creation. "The blessings resulting from this act of infusion reach the entire good creation, promoting life and giving strength to the whole universe."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid, verse 3.

⁶⁷ Kotwal and Boyd (1991), pg. 14.

The interplay of fire and water is cyclical and symbiotic. Empowered by the luminous fire during the rite, the *haoma* libation is poured into the well while the priests recite request that the “offering reach the immortal and radiant sun.”⁶⁸

Ritual fire and water, including the rules that govern their interaction, function to purify the body, mind, and actions of a practicing Zoroastrian. Ritual practice serves to orient the self (actions, words, and thoughts) around luminosity and purity instead of centering on temporary sense objects, which are mixed with the *daev-ic* creation. It also serves to empower, purify, and regenerate the good creation of Ahura Mazda. In other words, the *meaning* of the *yasna* is intricately bound up with what it *means* to be a Zoroastrian—that is, to participate in a coherent ritual universe where the believer transacts with the ‘wholly other’ by performing conscious acts intended to shape his own world as well as the world around him.

Fire and Water in a Vedic Ritual Universe

Darrow’s analysis of the syntactic rules pertaining to fire and water in the Zoroastrian context can be applied to paradigmatic rites in the Vedic and *tantric* ritual universes. Specifically, Vedic and *tantric* sacrifices, including purification and initiation rites, follow specific rules that govern the use of fire and water. As in Zoroastrian rites, water precedes *and* follows fire; water is plural, fire is singular; water is feminine and regenerative, fire masculine and destructive; water is the

⁶⁸ (Kotwal and Boyd; 1991, pg. 129). About half the libation is poured into the well and the other half given to the sponsors of the rite.

container, fire is the contained; water exists on a horizontal plane, fire on a vertical plane; water travels downward, fire upward. These syntactic rules help illuminate the meaning of ritual as it develops in distinct contexts. Individual traditions interpret the meaning of this interplay in a manner that resonates with the larger ritual universe into which they have been incorporated.

Vedic sacrifice is not easily reconstructed in form or in meaning due largely to the plurality surrounding the category Vedic.⁶⁹ What we can know about the early forms of Vedic sacrifice is quite limited since, as pointed out by Jamison and Witzel, it is not until the very end of the Vedic period (in the *Śrautasūtras*) that there is an attempt at systemizing the rites. They conclude that the rites compiled in the *Śrautasūtras* reveal an immense embedding of smaller ritual units into larger, more elaborate ceremonies. Impressive ritual performances, such as the *Agniṣṭoma* and *Agnicayana*, are comprised of smaller ritual units and, as such, represent examples of ritual complexity—that is, the development of complex ritual structure out of smaller units and independent rites.

This conclusion resonates with the research of Gonda. Gonda depicts the *sūtra* authors (*sūtrakāras*) as ‘shadowy figures’, who borrowed from various *śākhās* (Vedic schools) in their attempt to systemize rites. He concludes that there must have existed “floating mass” of *mantras* and ritual sequences from which the authors

⁶⁹ For example, as discussed thoroughly in Chapter Four, the Atharva Veda contains distinct ritual elements not prevalent in the *Śrautasūtras*. Moreover, ‘Vedic’ texts continue to be produced for centuries and thus, sacrifice tends to be recast in contextually specific ways. For example, the interiorization of sacrifice is discussed in certain Upaniṣads, wherein sacrifice takes on new meaning and interpretation that mirrors contemporaneous literature from other religious traditions, yet is cast in Brahmanical terms (see, for example, BK Smith, 1989, 206-207).

derived their material. Thus, what we can know about ‘Vedic sacrifice’ is to a great extent colored by the overlay of meaning intended by authors of the *Śrautasūtras*.

The important point to note here is that diffusionist theories do not work well to interpret “Vedic Sacrifice”, as it is not something that existed in a pure state and subsequently moved through time and space. Rather, Vedic ritual consisted originally of multiple diverse structures, meanings, and functions that have been recast within particular literary and ritual moments. Thus, it is not surprising that Staal ultimately concluded that such rites were ‘rules without meaning’ as any unified meaning has been lost or obscured by the process of layering and ritual complexity. Nonetheless, there exists material from which we can glean some particular data pertaining to fire and water in Vedic rites.

Fire offerings, as in the Zoroastrian context, tend to be located in the center of the liturgy. In their study of Vedic rites, Jamison and Witzel demonstrate that both *haviryajña* and *somayajña* offerings are located at the exact center of ‘bilaterally symmetrical structure.’⁷⁰ They conclude that the primary ritual element is fire: “The principal and central act of almost all Vedic rituals is the offering of various edible or drinkable substances into the fire.”⁷¹

The ritual structure of the *agniṣṭoma* reveals a similar bilateral structure, with symmetrical sequences framing the central offering. Staal summarizes as follows:

In the Agniṣṭoma the final bath (avabhr̥tha) at the end corresponds to the consecration at the beginning, and the concluding offering

⁷⁰ Jamison and Witzel (1992), pg. 36. They note striking parallels between the early Vedic and Avestan literature but doubt the extent to which we can reconstruct lines of transmission.

⁷¹ Ibid, pg. 34.

(udayanīyeṣṭi) similarly corresponds to the introductory offering, the departure (udavasāna) to the entrance (adhyavasāna), the dissolution (sakhyavisarjana) to the alliance (tānūnaptra), and so forth. In all these cases, a large number of rites and rituals intervene between these initial and final rites. However, if we look at smaller units, we often find the same structure, and the intervening portion is correspondingly clarified.⁷²

The structure allows for the ritual to “be extended indefinitely” with “indefinitely increasing complexity.”⁷³ However, particular syntactic rules governing fire and water remain constant, just as the structure does, between independent rites and the larger frame within which they are practiced.

For example, water serves as the framing principle in most Vedic rites, both in simple ritual sequences and in elaborate liturgies. Almost uniformly, Vedic texts require that the ritualist undertake a purificatory bath prior to a rite and then perform the *avabhṛta* or ‘final bath’ afterwards. In the five-day *agniṣṭoma* program, the first and last days are dedicated to purification of the *yajamāna* via water.⁷⁴ And, in the contemporary performance of the elaborate Vedic *pavitreṣṭi*, the preliminary and concluding rites likewise focus on water and purification by water.⁷⁵ Even fire offerings performed within elaborate rites are framed by sequences utilizing ritual water. For example, at one moment in the *rājasūyayajña* the *yajamāna* pours water into the *palāśa* vessel and gives it to his son before offering an oblation of ghee into

⁷² Here, he refers us also to the work of Hubert and Mauss (Staal, 1983 Vol. II), pg. 128.

⁷³ Ibid, pg. 129.

⁷⁴ Ibid, pg. VII.

⁷⁵ Tachikawa, Bahulkar, and Kolhatkar (2001).

the fire. Next, “He offers the remaining quantity of the Abhiṣeka water on the northern half of the Āgnīdhṛīya fire.”⁷⁶

Given the massive amount of material included in the category Vedic, it would be impossible to illuminate a single *meaning* attributed to the ritual interplay of fire and water, but, though Vedic texts attribute a variety of functions to the ritual use of fire, certain themes seem prominent.

Malamoud argues that cooking represents the predominant use of ritual fire in Vedic *śrauta* rites. He takes a literal translation of *lokapati* (cooking the world) as his starting point for analyzing a number of paradoxical couplings found in Vedic texts, such as village (*grama*) versus forest (*araṇya*) and principal versus remainder to conclude that the literal oblation (vegetal or animal) really functions as a substitute for the sacrificer himself, who, in the end, is the true sacrificial substance. In short, Malamoud gives sufficient data to warrant the interpretation that fire in a *śrauta* ritual context serves as the ‘cooker’ of oblations.

Uma Vesci undertakes a study of the various references to heat in Vedic literature and agrees with Malamoud that ‘*pac*’ indeed is one of the terms used for the function of a sacrificial fire. However, she points out that a separate fire is used to cook the oblations than the one into which they are offered. Furthermore, there are various other Sanskrit roots for ‘heat’ that appear in connection with *soma* rites. For example, *ghṛ* (*gharma*), *tap* (*tapas* or *tapus*), *suc* (*sociś*), and others occur, each with varying meaning. In other words, fire served multiple functions in Vedic ritual.

⁷⁶ KŚS 15.6.12 (Ranade, 1978, pg. 431).

Interestingly, one of the oldest derivations of *tap*, *tapus*, is used in the sense of ‘burning heat that destroys the enemies.’

Blair argues that the functions of ritual fire all relate to the production of heat. Agni, as he exists in Vedic mythology, pervades all three regions and, accordingly, performs various functions. On the terrestrial plane, Agni exists in the form of ritual fire where he functions to generate heat to cook the offerings and warm the liquid. In the atmospheric region, as lightning, Agni participates in the production of rain. Atmospheric heat is required to produce rain that, in turn, is required for birth and growth. Finally, as the sun, Agni represents the very source of heat and light, as represented in a central *mantra* recited in the Vedic *agnihotra*, which identifies Agni with *jyotir*, the very source of light: ‘the light is Agni, Agni is the light’ (*agnir jyotir, jyotir agniḥ*).⁷⁷

The various functions and forms of Agni mirror each other. Just as ritual fire conveys oblations, opening a channel between the microcosm and macrocosm, the sun stands between the terrestrial and celestial. On the first day of the *agnicayana* ceremony, as part of the *saṃkalpa* (declaration of intent to perform the ceremony), the *yajamāna* seeks to align his thoughts with the light of Savitr,⁷⁸ reciting RV 3.62.10: “May we receive this desirable light of the god Savitr, who shall impel our thoughts.”⁷⁹ In other words, via sacrifice, Vedic man seeks to establish himself in the

⁷⁷Cited in Witzel (1992).

⁷⁸ Sun deity often identified with Sūrya.

⁷⁹ *Om tatsaviturvareṇyam | Bhargo devasya dhīmahi | Dhiyo yo nahḥ pracodayāt* | Staal (1983), pg. 283. This verse must be commonly recited in contemporary fire rites, as it was taught to me by Priyag Giri,

luminous heavenly realm: “Sūrya, the highest light (*jyotis*), is the heavenly world: it is in the heavenly world he thus finally establishes himself.”⁸⁰

Theodore Proferes has recently analyzed this connection between the sun and ritual fire in terms of royal legitimization. He argues that ritual fire, specifically in the form of Agni Vaiśvānara, is identified with the sun and the king in order to function as a potent symbol of political power. The ability of the sun to project through space, to traverse across territory, and to ascend above everything makes it an apt symbol of political rule.⁸¹ Proferes offers the following *Atharvanic* formula that connects the leader with the highest, luminous sky:

In him may the Vasus maintain wealth, Indra Pūṣan Varuṇa Mitra
and Agni! Him may the Ādityas and the Viśve Devas maintain in the
higher light!

May light be at his command, O deities—sun, fire, as well as gold!
May rivals be beneath us! Make this man ascend to the highest
firmament.

With that highest *brahman* by which you collected fluids for Indra, O
Jātavedas, increase the (man) heare! Place him in supremacy over his
kinsmen!⁸²

Therefore, ritual fire served to reinforce the identity between the king and the macrocosmic sun.

As interpreted on a personal level, the individual also was understood to have a direct relationship to the sun via the ritual fire. Vedic conceptions developed in

a *śaiva bāba* in Gamukh who recited it daily while feeding offerings to his own ritual fire. He began the verse with ‘*Om bhū bhuvah svah*’.

⁸⁰ ŚB XXII, 9, 2, 8 (SBE, Vol. 44, pg. 267).

⁸¹ Proferes (2007), pg. 46–49.

⁸² AVŚ 1.9.1–1.9.3; as cited in Proferes (2007), pg. 50.

*Upanisads*⁸³ identify the sun as the lid of the universe, through which one could escape rebirth. Thus, the sun represents the channel through which the individual connects with the macrocosm. In this context, the rays of the macrocosmic sun are explicitly connected with the arteries of the individual body:

Now, these veins of the heart consist of the finest essence of orange, white, blue, yellow, and red. The sun up there, likewise, is orange, white, blue, yellow, and red. Just as a long highway traverses both the villages, the one near by and the one far away, so also these rays of the sun traverse both the worlds, the one down here and the one up above. Extending out from the sun up there, they slip into these veins here, and extending out from these veins here, they slip into the sun up there.

So, when someone is sound asleep here, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams, he has then slipped into these veins. No evil thing can touch him, for he is then linked with radiance.

Now, when someone here has become extremely infirm, people sit around him and ask: 'Do you recognize me?' 'Do you recognize me?' As long as he has not departed from the body, he would recognize them. But when he is departing from this body, he rises up along those same rays. He goes up with the sound 'OM'. No sooner does he think of it, than he reaches the sun. It is the door to the farther world, open to those who have the knowledge but closed to those who do not. In this connection, there is this verse:

On hundred and one, the veins of the heart.
One of them runs up to the crown of the head.
Going up by it, he reaches the immortal.
The rest, in their ascent, spread out in all directions.⁸⁴

Thus, an individual's connection to the sun is not merely a psychological or spiritual experience, but it is also a bodily one. This connection can also be seen in epic

⁸³ The *Upaniṣads*, authored in the late Vedic period, offer new interpretations of sacrifice. Just prior to the verse above, this Upaniṣad claims that what people call sacrifice (*yajña*) is, in reality, the life of a celibate student.

⁸⁴ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.6; in Olivelle (1996), pp. 170-171.

accounts of dying heroes who, as they rise out of their bodies via rays, “pierce the orb of the sun and attain the world of immortal gods.”⁸⁵

Vedic Sacrifice serves to induce the bodily connection between the macro and the micro and, thus, represents one means of connecting man with the luminous. As White points out, “In the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, the inner selves of individuals are portrayed as tiny points of light, with each linked, at birth and at death, to a ray of the sun.”⁸⁶ Vedic rites function to reinforce this link during one’s life. For example, Gonda points out that in the Vedic *pravargya* ceremonies, the fire is understood to be a ‘ritual duplicate of the sun’ and the “aim of the performance seems to have been to endow the sacrificer with the glow of that luminary.”⁸⁷

Next, although the role of fire seems to be privileged in Vedic sources, the ritual use of water is at least coequal. There are multiple independent rites, as well as individual ritual sequences within elaborate sacrifices, that center around water. For example, a common and pervasive rite, *tarpana*, consists of pouring water libations (*āpya*) for departed ancestors. Water sequences are also repeatedly performed within elaborate ceremonies, such as the royal sacrifice (*rājasūyayajña*). At various points within the rite, the *purohita* sprinkles the body of the sacrificer and of family members with water while repeating the expression ‘*abhiṣiñcāmi*’ (I sprinkle thee).⁸⁸

⁸⁵ White (2009), pg. 83. And, later Upaniṣadic passages explicitly link this discussion of the rise of the soul via the rays of the sun to the practice of yoga (pg. 89).

⁸⁶ White (2009), pg. 123.

⁸⁷ Gonda (1965), pg. 47.

⁸⁸ KŚS 15.5.28-29 (Ranade, 1978 pg. 429).

Water, regarded as the great purifier,⁸⁹ both precedes and follows fire. As already mentioned, the *agnicayana* ceremony begins with consecration of the *yajamāna* via water and concludes with the final bath (*avabhṛtha*). The consecration begins with *saṃkalpa*, a purification ritual repeated several times throughout the ceremony. In the *saṃkalpa* rite, there are sequences requiring the ritual use of water including external (*bāhyaśuddhi*)⁹⁰ and internal (*antaḥśuddhi*)⁹¹ purifications.

In the final bath, water again serves to purify the *yajamāna*, purging his body of defilements and sins. “Even as one would pluck out a reed from its sheath, so he plucks him from out all evil. He bathes, and (thereby) drives the darkness (of sin) from himself.”⁹² Independent water sequences found within the ceremony are understood to mirror this process:

He should pour down (waters) in the altar with *akṣityām akṣitāhutim juhomi svāhā*. Having offered the oblation, one makes (the fires) flare up (by putting on fire-sticks) for the flaring up of the *Brahman*-splendour; he pours down waters, he (thereby) reproduces a form of the final sacrificial bath.⁹³

Again, the structure of the embedded rites mirrors the structure of the outer frame.

Water, like fire, is multivalent within the Vedic ritual universe. Although I applaud Staal’s attempt to divorce syntactic ritual from religious semantics, the mythic cannot be completely divorced from ritual. Mythical data often represents the only evidence we possess, besides archaeological, to reconstruct the ‘Vedic’

⁸⁹ Modak refers us to RV 7.49.2,3; AV 1.33.1.4; ŚB 1.7.4.17 (1993, pg. 73, fn# 192).

⁹⁰ Comprised of “*snāna* (bathing), *pavana* (cleansing), *ācamana* (sipping water) and *puṇyāhavacana* (proclamation of auspiciousness)” Ibid.

⁹¹ Comprised of “*prāṇāyāma* (breathing) and *ākūtyāvedana* (another declaration of intention)” Ibid.

⁹² ŚB XXII, 9, 2, 7 (SBE, Vol. 44, pg. 267).

⁹³ *Śrautakośa*; Dandekar (1958, 1962), pg. 94.

worldview within which sacrifice developed. In other words, though syntax cannot, and should not, be reduced to semantics, there is a limit to how much we can understand syntactic rules without engaging the semantics applied to the rules at any given point in history.

In Vedic mythology, as in ritual, Agni has a complicated relationship to the waters. Stories of Agni consistently depict him as being contained by (or born of) the waters. In one myth, Agni is described as being an “emanation or creation” of Vāc, the Goddess of Speech, who fashioned the *salilāni* ‘tumultuous chaotic floods’ that were ‘present at the beginning’ and from whom the oceans flowed forth, bringing about the entire universe.⁹⁴ Other myths identify Agni with Apam Napāt (son of the waters), born of the union between fire and liquid (Agni and Soma).⁹⁵

The common mythic theme of fire (Agni) being contained and surrounded by water is represented in ritual practice. Throughout the *agnicayana*, fire is either contained with a clay pot, such as the *ukhā*, or within the prepared altar (*vedī*). In the preliminary rites of the *agnicayana* (which begin months prior), sacred fire is kept in the *ukhā* pot and used by the *yajamāna* during his consecration.⁹⁶ Then, on the first day of the ceremony proper, the three fires are “carried in clay pots on a plank”⁹⁷ before being ritually installed within the elevated altars.

⁹⁴ cf. Brown (1968), pg. 204, 207.

⁹⁵ For more regarding the complicated relationship between Agni, Soma, and Apām Napāt, cf. Magoun (1898) and Sharma (1996).

⁹⁶ See Yasuke Ikari (1983: in Staal Vol. II.), pg. 168.

⁹⁷ Staal (1983 Vol I), pg. 279.

The motif of fire in the waters, Proferes argues, also “was closely associated with the constitution of royal authority.”⁹⁸ The hymn recited prior to the consecration (*abhiṣeka*) of a king reads, “I invoke you, all fires sitting within the waters; in me deposit splendor, strength, and might.”⁹⁹ Powers are conferred upon the king via the unction of waters, referred to as ‘givers of dominion’ (*rāṣṭradāh*), ‘increasers of dominion’ (*rāṣṭrasya vardhanīh*), and ‘bearers of dominion’ (*rāṣṭrabhṛtaḥ*).¹⁰⁰

Water, far from being contained, overflows and is sprinkled throughout the ceremony. During the preparation of the altars, the *yajamāna* sprinkles water from a clay *kinḍi* and recites:

Waters! You are givers of health.
Give us strength to see great joy!
Like eager mothers grant us here the most auspicious essence
that you possess.
To this may we suitably come, to whose power you impel us.
Waters, propagate us!¹⁰¹

He then sips water (*ācamana*) and sprinkles his face, reciting: ‘*Bhū, Bhūvaḥ Svah*’ before installing the three fires. Many other rites, such as *iṣṭi* sacrifices, similarly prescribe that the *yajamāna* sip water and that the fire altar be prepared by pouring water libations (*āpya*)¹⁰² or wiping off the place around the fire three times (a common ritual act known as *samūhana*).¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Proferes (2007), pg. 77.

⁹⁹ From AB 8.6.10. Cited in Proferes (2007), pg. 77.

¹⁰⁰ Proferes (2007), pg. 80.

¹⁰¹ TS 4.1.5.1b-d; Ibid, pg. 282.

¹⁰² Dumont (1957), pg. 216.

¹⁰³ cf. Gopal’s analysis of *homa* procedure as found in the *Kalpasūtras* (1959), pg. 381-2.

In the *rājasūya*, a late Vedic ritual that “represents an important stage in this process of emerging kingship and its legitimation,”¹⁰⁴ water comes to be interpreted as the downward flowing of the king’s authority.

To safeguard and legitimize this aim must have been the major purpose of the grand *rājasūya* ceremony with its large number of complicated rituals. In this context it is significant that, after having sprinkled the *rājā* with ‘overflowing water’ through which the *rājā* absorbed men from another *rāṣṭra*, the priest had to sprinkle the water of the ‘Lord of the Rivers (*naḍīpati*) (5.3.4.10) or ocean which makes the *rājā* the ‘lord of the (many) *viś* (*viśam*).¹⁰⁵

Water surrounds and is sprinkled around fire but does not enter into it:

During the *abhiṣeka* or sprinkling ceremony, the priest takes overflowing (*parivāhiṇī*) water that flows off the main current. ‘With that (water) he sprinkles. Now that (flow of water), after separating (*apacchid*) itself from that main (current), comes to be that again; and so there is in his kingdom (*rāṣṭra*) even one belonging to some other kingdom, and even that man from another kingdom he absorbs: thus he (the priest) bestows abundance (*bhūman*) upon him (the king), and it is with abundance that he thus consecrates him’ (5.3.4.9).¹⁰⁶

In this context, the performance of the *rājasūya* not only represented the outward reach of the king’s authority, it helped effect it.

Blair interprets the downward movement of ritual water in terms of ritual heat. He argues that, just as the production of rain requires heat (either that of the sun or of lightning), the *gharma* vessel requires heat. This heat, produced directly by the ritual fire, is also generated by the practitioner’s actions:

¹⁰⁴ Kulke (1992), pg. 188.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, pg. 193.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The greater his devotional efforts the hotter he gets, and his sweat, as a measure of his devotional heat, has a magic power of its own. In other passages this sweat is likened to rain just as the contents of the gharma vessel when heated sufficiently became rain [fn 25 RV. VII, 103, 8 and 9]. Here is a clear and definite example of the identity of the sweat of the body, the liquid contents of the ritual vessel, and the liquid product of the cosmos, with heat playing the identical role in the activity of each.¹⁰⁷

The downward pouring of liquid (in this case the sweat of the practitioner) is likened to the “nourishing and fertilizing rain come down as a gift to mankind.”¹⁰⁸

In summary, the rules that govern the interplay of fire and water reveal multivalent yet consistent meanings specific to the Vedic worldview. A basic tenet of Āyurvedic medicine, that all biological phenomena require balance between fire and liquid, can be applied to life in general. All life depends upon the balance of fire and water.¹⁰⁹ *Yajña* functions to orient the ritual participant towards this balance—between fire and water as well as between the celestial and terrestrial. Ritual fire, like the sun, serves as a means to connect the macro and micro-cosms. Water provides the nourishment needed to balance the fire—on the macrocosmic plane as well as within the microcosmic body.

Fire and Water in a Tantric Ritual Universe

Though the category ‘*tantra*’ includes “a complex array of ritual, theoretical, and narrative strategies that are specific to their various religious, cultural,

¹⁰⁷ Blair (1961), pg. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Sharma, who argues that Soma originally represented a water, not plant, principle similarly claims that “Life is, in fact, equilibrium of *agni* and *soma*” (1996), pg. 112.

sociopolitical, geographical, and historical contexts,”¹¹⁰ there still exist some common denominators, what White refers to as the ‘there’ of *tantra*. Accordingly, we find some common conceptions of ritual across Hindu and Buddhist *tantras*.

Tantric sādhana consists of two symbiotic poles: *kriyā* (practice) and *jñāna* (knowledge).¹¹¹ Scholars seem to agree that self-purification and self-deification comprise central elements of the *tantric* path that distinguish it from previous Vedic conceptions.¹¹² The emphasis placed on self-purification subsequently alters the ways in which fire and water are understood to function in *tantric* ritual practice and, though continuities with the Vedic universe exist, there are some *tantric*-specific developments that extend across Buddhist and Hindu sources.

In his comparison of Vedic and *tantric agnihotra* rituals, Witzel argues that both are governed by a similar frame structure; “Ritual does not have, as Staal will have it, a structure similar to an inverted tree, so well known from modern grammarians, but rather a complicated frame structure.”¹¹³ Though the basic Vedic structure remains intact, several ritual frames are added in the medieval *tantric* systems. Thus, *tantric* ritual structure is not a mere survival of old Vedic forms, but,

¹¹⁰ White (2000), pg. 5).

¹¹¹ Richard Davis argues for a “metaphysical unity of knowledge and action” in a Śaiva Siddhānta ritual universe in order to indicate the complex intertwining of knowing and acting in the *tantric* context.

¹¹² See, for example, Gupta and Goudriaan (1979), Wheelock (1989), Witzel (1992), Cuevas (1996), and White (2000).

¹¹³ Witzel (1992), pg. 781. Here, Witzel offers a helpful chart to illustrate his point.

rather, a ‘special development,’ “an amalgamation which involved various strands of traditions both ancient and medieval, and both local and supraregional.”¹¹⁴

Though both Vedic and *tantric* forms of *agnihotra* serve as a “mesocosm to connect the microcosmic aspect of man with the macrocosmic one of the deities,”¹¹⁵ the latter contains meanings specific to its *tantric* context. First, the medieval version of the rite is unique in that the central act “consists of a secret, mental identification of the priest with the fire in front of him, and with Viṣṇu who is the Fire and the Sun.”¹¹⁶ Rays of the sun, identified with the ritual fire, come to be “understood as conduits, rather than harnesses” for connecting the luminous person with the macrocosm and, by extension, with “all that exists—including one another.”¹¹⁷

Next, new *tantric* meanings—particularly those regarding the balance of male and female forces—are applied to the interplay between fire and water. Within the *tantric* ritual universe, Witzel identifies the male element, fire, as the active one—it flames upwards and is represented by a triangle. Water, the female element represented by downwards triangle, in contrast, is passive and watery. Though fire is not united with water in either Vedic or *tantric* form, water is sprinkled around the

¹¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 785. Witzel’s argument helps support my claim that historical trends must be considered when studying ritual traditions. Across traditions, we see parallel developments historically, indicative of the continual contact and exchange that occurs. In *tantric* ritual universe, we see medieval additions across the board; not just in structure but in substances offered, nomenclature employed, theological meanings proposed, etc. (see Chapter Three).

¹¹⁵ Witzel (1992), pg. 808.

¹¹⁶ Witzel (1992), pg. 802.

¹¹⁷ White (2009), pg. 122-123. Here, White is specifically discussing “the rise of the luminous person (*puruṣa*), self (*ātman*), or lifebody (*jīva*) of the dying or departing individual” and the ‘science of entering another body.’ However, I believe his points apply also to the shift in understanding that we see between Vedic and *tantric* speculations on the role of ritual fire. White himself argues that, “Indic metaphysics of rays came to be applied to the diverse yet interconnected fields of aesthetics, epistemology, climatology.”

ritual fire; it surrounds Agni everywhere but does not enter him. In *tantric* meanings, Agni (the male ritual fire) is envisioned as “burning in the womb of the female Goddess Earth, represented by pit dug or fire altars. What is poured into fire altar is ghee, symbol of semen; from yoni shaped offering ladle.”¹¹⁸ This productive union of Agni and *śakti*, by pouring ghee into the fire pit, constitutes, Witzel argues, perhaps “the deepest meaning” for the *tantric agnihotra*.¹¹⁹ This is the sexualization of ritual, which Sylvain Lévi identified as the source of real and symbolic *tantric* sex.¹²⁰

Other *tantric* specific meanings emerge during the medieval period. Fire, the central focus in many *tantric* rituals, is primarily understood to have a destructive function—destroying false views and karmic propensities, including the past sins of either the practitioner or the initiate. Thus, the destructive force of heat tends to be directed towards the self rather than projected outward towards enemies, as in Vedic conceptions.¹²¹

Water also predominates in *tantric* rituals and, in fact, may be more prevalent. For example, water is required in all initiation rites (*dikṣā* or *abhiṣeka*) whereas fire only sometimes is used. Here, as in earlier conceptions, water serves to purify and empower the ritual elements, including the participants. In the *tantric* ritual universe, water symbolism comes to be also employed to describe the function

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ On this point, see White (2003), pg. 8.

¹²¹ Although Vedic healing rites are directed towards the self to the extent that the practitioner hopes to destroy *takman* or some other disease that afflicts the body. As discussed at length in Chapter Four, these healing rites are found mostly in the Atharva Veda.

of seed *mantras*. These seed *mantras*, imposed on the ritual *maṇḍala* and on the *sādhaka*'s body, exemplify the deities themselves and, thus, aid in transforming the mind of the *sādhaka*.

Consecration and Initiation in Buddhist Tantras

Both Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* rites follow common rules pertaining to fire and water. For example, ritual bathing is required prior to performing any *tantric* ritual and most rites conclude by incorporating water either symbolically or literally. One distinguishing feature in the *tantric* ritual universe is that there is a move towards internalization. Though exoteric practice continues to be widespread in *tantric sādhana*, even the external fire and water are understood to function on an internal level. This can be seen most clearly in *tantric* consecration and initiation rites (*abhiṣeka* and *dīkṣā*) and purification rites (*bhūtaśuddhi* or *ātmaśuddhi*).

First, Buddhist *tantric* ritual prescriptions reveal important conceptions regarding the interplay of ritual fire and water in initiation rites (*abhiṣeka*). Jeffrey Hopkins offers a good overview of the importance of *tantric* initiation rites in the Buddhist context:

Initiation means to cleanse and purify defilements; to authorize students to hear about and cultivate the tantric paths and to achieve special feats; to empower the attainment of beneficial qualities; to set potencies for attaining levels of the path and the fruits of those paths; to sprinkle water; to pour potencies and cast seeds into the mental continuum of the initiate; to convey a new style of behavior and its

attendant releases from distorted states; and to cause initiates to be endowed with a blissful mind.¹²²

The central meaning attributed to initiation, then, consists of transforming the mind from a distorted state to an enlightened one (*bodhicitta*).

Transformation (on both a micro-and macrocosmic level), described as purification, is effected via the use of fire and water in both internal and exoteric rituals. In the Dalai Lama's commentary to the *Kālacakratāntra*, he explains the three *Kālacakras*—external, internal, and alternative—as follows:

The external Kālachakra refers to all of the environment---the mountains, fences, homes, planets, constellations of stars, solar systems, and so forth. The internal Kālachakra refers to the person's body having a nature of channels, winds, and drops of essential fluid. The alternative Kālachakra refers to the methods for purifying the impure factors of the external and internal Kālachakras—these being the bases of purification—and thereby bringing about transformation into a Kālachakra of the effect state of Buddhahood.¹²³

Within the initiations, the outer and inner ritual frames tend to incorporate similar rules pertaining to fire and water. The exoteric *homa* sacrifices, which precede the *abhiṣeka* ceremony, follow the same basic structure as the extended initiation rites. This exoteric sacrifice utilizes fire and water as mediums to purify the initiate of defilements and sins. The internal fire burns mental afflictions (*kleśa*) as the external

¹²² Hopkins (1985), pg. 67.

¹²³ Hopkins (1985), pg. 212.

fire burns the offerings. Water is sprinkled over the student in order to cleanse and empower his inner potencies.¹²⁴

Ritual fire thus primarily serves a destructive function. Just as the external fire burns and destroys physical substances, the internal fire burns away past ‘sins,’ incorrect ways of thinking, and ontological constructs that obstruct clarity. Fire, conceived of as wisdom itself, has not only a destructive function but also an empowering one. Internalized fire is understood to burn wisdom in heart/mind of the adept. This occurs via creative visualization where one associates his consciousness with the luminous qualities of fire. As explained by Buddhist monk, Ikeguchi, during the *homa*, practitioners imagine to burn the “wisdom of fire within their hearts in order to eliminate the confusion . . . I try to invite the Buddha and make myself a Buddha by lighting the fire in my dark inside and separating the wisdom from the confusion completely.”¹²⁵

This luminous quality accounts for the transformative function of Buddhist rituals. Ritual primarily functions to mediate luminous powers between the enlightened beings (such as *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*) and the ritual practitioner. Wallis characterizes “the conceptual world operating in the *Mmk* [*Mañjuśrīmulakalpa*]” as being founded on the belief that “enlightened beings are actively engaged in the world on behalf of devotees.” Ritual represents the means by which the power of these beings is made manifest.

¹²⁴ For discussions of the relationship between royal and *tantric* consecration, see White (2003), pg. 134; Davidson (2002); and Hopkins (1985), pg. 66.

¹²⁵ Potier (2001).

Light imagery is commonly employed to describe *tathāgatas*, *bodhisattvas*, and other enlightened beings in Buddhist *tantras*. For example, the luminous quality of Śākyamuni is described in the opening scene of *Mmk* 8. When he smiles, he emits “brilliant, colorful, and cosmically cataclysmic rays of light from his mouth.”¹²⁶ Elsewhere, Mañjuśrī is described as a solar disc, arisen from the syllable DHIIḤ, from which “lights emanate and invite the *tathāgatas*, *bodhisattvas*, wisdom-goddesses and wrathful ones who reside in the ten directions . . . The light which blazes from this illuminates fully for a hundred thousand leagues around.”¹²⁷ This luminous atmosphere surrounding enlightened beings is portrayed iconographically with a luminous aureole, a halo, and/or with flames rising from their shoulders.¹²⁸

Wisdom is transmitted from these radiant beings via rays of light: “Then those rays of light gathered together from the sky and flowed down onto the crown of Vajrapāṇi’s head.”¹²⁹ The rays of light represent the connecting link between the luminous beings and the *sādhaka*. In the Kalāchakra initiation, deities of the *maṇḍala* are dissolved into the *sādhaka*’s action faculties; a transaction conceived of as follows: “Light rays from them draw in the male and female Wrathful Deities of the mandala in the manner of a second butter lamp separating off from the first.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Wallis (2002), pg. 25.

¹²⁷ Siklos (1996), pg. 38.

¹²⁸ The portrayal of flames rising from the shoulders is likely Iranian in origin (See Stein 1921, pg. 874).

¹²⁹ MVT VII.53 (Hodge, 2003, pg. 431).

¹³⁰ Hopkins (1985), pg. 325. David White discusses this phenomena and argues that this language of the luminous appears to have emerged out of Kashmir in the early Mahāyāna period (2009, Chapter three).

Water sequences frame the central merging with fire in both internal and external rites. The various categories of exoteric *homa* all begin with sprinkling the hearth with water and culminate with the *mantrin*, who has visualized Agni shining forth in a specific form, sprinkling more water. In the pacifying (*śāntika*) *homa*, the body image of Agni has the “color of conch, jasmine or moon.” He is dressed in white robes and “emits white tongues of fire and is Awareness in nature.” After thus visualizing Agni, the *mantrin* should “sprinkle [around] Agni in a circular manner, with water consecrated with the Mantra of the Noble Acala.”¹³¹ In the enriching (*pauṣṭika*) *homa*, Agni arises ‘from the shining light,’ gold in color, with yellow robes, and emitting ‘blazing tongues of fire.’ The “*mantrin* should then cleanse him with sprinkled water, wash his face and offer him the oblation.”¹³² And, in the subduing *homa*, after imagining the “*RA* letter which radiates out a blazing garland of fire changing into the body-image of Agni, dressed in red robes, radiating red light from blazing tongues,” the *mantrin* should then “purify him with sprinkled water.”¹³³

This process is further mirrored in *homa* ceremonies performed at the time of cremation. Within the ceremony, fire offerings are again followed by consecration with water. The ritual performer invites Agni to merge with the ritual fire; (“Oh fire-god radiant with the flames of splendour, I invite you to take residence inside these

¹³¹ MVUT I.25 (Hodge, pg. 400).

¹³² MVUT II.12 (Ibid, pg. 405).

¹³³ MVUT III. 7 (Ibid, pg. 407). Interestingly, in the *abhicāra homa* prescribed here, the body-image of Agni is imagined as ‘smoky, black in color’, with radiance that is ‘smoky like blue rain clouds.’ However, here, there is no requirement to sprinkle him with water; it is only prescribed that the *mantrin* should offer him ‘perfumes and so forth.” (pg. 411) For comparable description of the four *homa* rites, see Skorupski (2001), pg. 183-222.

flames”) and to summon other enlightened beings (“Dispersing once again the rays of light from their hearts, I summon the five Buddha families and execute the consecration.”)¹³⁴ This is followed by offering two kinds of water “which fills their bodies and overflows on the top.”¹³⁵ The overall structure, of course, follows the same pattern. The corpse, first ritually cleansed with water, is incinerated in the crematory fire. The rite concludes by depositing the ashes into water. If the ashes come from a “pure person” they are to be thrown into large bodies of water and, when “living beings drink this water, their obscurities become purified.”¹³⁶

Initiation ceremonies similarly have both outer and inner ritual frames, with water sequences framing the central fire offering in both. For example, Kālachakra systems list water initiation as the first of fifteen initiations and speech (often identified with water) as the last. Within each of the fifteen initiations, sprinkling of water follows the mental ‘merging’ with wisdom, described in terms of light or fire. Light is the medium through which the practitioner merges with wisdom: “Light is emitted from the hūṃ at their hearts, which draws in Wisdom Beings.”¹³⁷ Then, offerings of perfume, flowers, incense, etc. are followed by a water initiation, where the initiate’s body parts are sprinkled with water. Specifically, the following is prescribed: “With the water touch the five places—crown protrusion, right and left

¹³⁴ Skorupski (2001), pg. 158.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid, pg. 170.

¹³⁷ See, for example, Hopkins (1985), pgs. 282, 293, 300, 320.

shoulders, upper arms, thighs, and hips—and having sprinkled a little, [have the student] drink a little and also wash, conferring initiation.”¹³⁸

A comparable description of Buddhist initiation, from *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra*, also begins with an exoteric *homa* sacrifice and ends with a water initiation:

Then the wise one himself performs with resolution the protective rite for his pupils (69a); he offers the *homa* sacrifice using firewood which has been smeared with clarified butter, sesame seeds and clarified butter mixed together, clarified butter and burnt offerings, and rice prepared with curds. In the first place this is done in order to nullify evil influences, and furthermore because of his concern (for them). Next he should perform the pacifying *homa* rite or the one for nullifying sins . . . Next, he should sprinkle their heads with water blessed with the recitations of the Wrathful ones . . . touching them on the heads he should recite the *mantra* applicable to all the rites.¹³⁹

Regarding the recitation of *mantras* belonging to the Wrathful deities, Wallis argues that, by mastering these Wrathful beings (through recitation of their seed *mantras*), the *sādhaka* is able to transform them into powers that serve his own aims. These *mantras* then serve to “destroy, purify, and convert energy of various forms of embodiment, including mental, supernatural, and physical.”¹⁴⁰ A specific example can be found in certain *abhicāra* rites, where one identifies himself with the wrathful, terrible deities, such as Vajrabhairava, “blazing like the fire of the age of destruction.” The practitioner thus visualizes himself as being the great

¹³⁸ See, for example, Hopkins (1985), pgs. 285, 296, 303, 323.

¹³⁹ Skorupski (1983), pg. 76.

¹⁴⁰ Wallis (2002), pg. 37.

Vajrabhairava, thus “able to devour the three worlds.”¹⁴¹ Wrathful beings are not appeased or combated, but appropriated for the *sādhaka*’s own goals. In these meditations, when water follows fire, it is often understood to have a pacifying function.¹⁴²

Just as water sequences frame exoteric fire offerings, both in the smaller and larger ritual frames, water imagery frames the burning of wisdom (a luminous encounter) in internalized rites. For example, in a relatively modern manual for self-initiation of *Vajrabhairava*, the center of the initiation consists of the practitioner merging with the light of Mañjuśrī:

Then think that all the faults of sentient beings, and particularly all faults of ignorance, are eliminated like the sun shining into a dark corner.

Think that you achieve a special light of wisdom like that of Mañjuśrī. Light is emanated outward, purifying the vessel and essence and placing sentient beings in a state of Mañjuśrī . . . Then visualize a brilliant orange DHIIH on the base of the tongue with its head facing your throat. In one breath, recite DHIIH one hundred times. Much light is emanated from this letter DHIIH, filling your own

¹⁴¹ Siklos (1996), pg. 37-8.

¹⁴² In the descriptions of the six magical rites of *tantra* (*ṣaṭkarmāṇi*), *Mantramahodadhi* correlates the element water with appeasement. Fire is associated with subjugation and liquidation, earth with immobilization, ether with enmity, and wind with eradication; in MM 25.23cd-26ab (Bühnemann, 2000). In *homa* prescribed in the *Kriyāsamgraha*, one throws mustard seeds (*sarṣapa*) into the fire while reciting the *mantra* for Vajrayakṣa in order to turn “into ashes all sins (*pāpa*), evil spirits (*vighna*), and *māras*.” Then, one sprinkles water and recites “appropriate mantras to pacify kleśa and upkleśa (primary & secondary defilements).” (Skorupski, 2002). And, the *Pariśiṣṭas*, which contain several elements that overlap with Buddhist tantras (See Chapter Four) similarly depict water as “a means of purification by which the evil effects which may be connected with certain actions are removed or appeasement is realized.” Specifically, “after having pronounced the word *vaśat* he (the priest) touches water; water is a means of appeasing and medicine (against evil influences) appeasing and medicine thus are produced at the end in the sacrifice” (Modak, 1993, pg. 73).

body entirely, and think that you have achieved a special power of memory not to forget the words and meanings of the teachings.¹⁴³

When reciting the *mantras*, one imagines an infinite light coming from the seed syllable and “filling the entire inside of your body [thus] eliminating the downfalls and obstacles accumulated from beginningless lives, as well as pacifying all sickness and evil spirits.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, the center of the internal process resembles exoteric sacrifice in that the practitioner identifies himself (merges consciousness) with light (fire).

Water imagery describes what follows this merging. With obstacles eliminated, one is transformed and regenerated via the influx of *mantras*. It is prescribed that one should “Think that a stream of nectar flows from the letter HUM surrounded by the hundred syllables at the heart of the respective lord of the family, and think that all downfalls are purified.”¹⁴⁵

The process of transforming the self occurs in ritual via identifying with a deity, a distinctive feature of *tantra*, where “the meditator first purifies himself of all past sins and erects about the place of contemplation a protective circle that delineates his new divine reality.”¹⁴⁶ After becoming ‘inseparably united with Buddhahood, taking on the knowledge form of the god,’

He visualizes that he is then initiated into his divine state by goddesses holding flasks filled with the nectar of the five knowledges,

¹⁴³ Tulku (1991), pg. 24. Translation of ritual text composed by Kyabje Phabongkha Rinpoche (1878-1941).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pg. 25-6.

¹⁴⁶ Prebish (2006), pg. 130.

which fills his entire body. Upon the top of his head there appears the *mantra OM*, upon his throat *ĀH*, and upon his heart *HŪM*, and these *mantras* make his body, his speech, and his mind into an unshakeable diamond.¹⁴⁷

Thus, the infusion of knowledge follows the burning of distorted mental dispositions and constructs.

In summary, the Buddhist *tantras* contain similar syntactic rules govern the use of fire and water in both the smaller ritual frames as well as the elaborate initiation structure. These rules come to be interpreted with language and imagery specific to the Buddhist *tantric* ritual universe. The transformative power of ritual functions by associating oneself, ritually, with the luminous wisdom embodied by the various *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*. Fire destroys impurities and incorrect mental formulations, thus burning wisdom into one's mind/heart. . The element water, identified with the seed *mantras* of the deities themselves, fertilizes potencies and leads to the generation of enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*).

Self-Purification in Hindu Tantras

Though distinct in several ways, many commonalities exist between Buddhist and Hindu *tantric* universes. Both prescribe numerous initiation and purification rituals intended to transform the self. Fire and water, again, function as the primary agents of transformation.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, pg. 131.

Richard Davis studies a number of rituals practiced within the *Śaiva Siddhanta* ritual universe, including initiation (*dīkṣā*) rites. As in the Buddhist *tantras*, external fire sacrifice (*homa*) is part of the practice and follows the same basic pattern as the larger ritual frame. Davis claims that *ātmaśuddhi* (purification of self) can also be seen as a shorter or abbreviated ritual sequence that accomplishes the same goal (via similar means) as the more elaborate *dīkṣā* ceremonies. He does not see the rites as being individuated or separated from each other, but as representing the same macrocosm—the universe of Śiva. Accordingly, we find similar rules governing the interplay between fire and water in both the elaborate *dīkṣā* rites and in the shorter *ātmaśuddhi* (which often precedes initiation).

Some initiation and purification rituals do not necessarily require an actual fire, but the internal process mirrors the external one. In two specific initiation rites that require an exoteric fire (*niṣeṣadīkṣā* and *nirvānadīkṣā*), fire is understood to burn the three fetters (*mala*, *karman* and *māyā*) like a ‘sacrificial fire burns offerings.’¹⁴⁸ First, in *niṣeṣadīkṣā*, the guru removes the ‘soul’ of the initiate from his body and transfers it into the womb of Vagīśvarī (goddess of speech), who is installed in the sacrificial fire. Second, *nirvānadīkṣā* represents fetter removal by transference to a cord (*paśasūtra*) that is fastened from the topknot to the toe. Fetters and impurities, which constitute the initiate’s body, are transferred onto the *paśasūtra* (often knots are tied in the cord), which is then transferred into the sacrificial fire and burned. Thus, the external fire functions to destroy impurities.

¹⁴⁸ Also, “Initiation annihilates fetters like a blazing fire” (Davis, 1991, pg. 92).

Internalized (imagined) fire functions in the same manner. In *ātmaśuddhi* sequences, the practitioner is to imagine internalized fire burning bodily and mental impurities. “With the fire arising from his right big toe, and with the ASTRA mantra, he burns the impurities of the elements located in the body, which is the product of *karman*.” The result of imagined fire, going upward from the toes, is that “all impurities that normally distinguish the worshipper’s body from that of Śiva have now been ritually extirpated.”¹⁴⁹

Mantras replace the impure constituents after they are incinerated. *Śaiva Siddhānta* authors enjoin that, following removal of bodily constituents, a divine body (modeled on the *Śaiva* cosmology) is constructed out of *mantras*. Water imagery is employed to describe the process:

Imagining it completely emptied of all that has the form of a fetter, the worshiper should bathe his entire body, inside and out, with streams of nectar flowing from the upside-down lotus at the top of his crown, penetrating the openings of every capillary, using MŪLĀ ending in VAUṢAT.¹⁵⁰

Even when internalized, ritual fire moves upward while liquid is poured downward.

The *Vīṇāśikhatantra* offers another description of *ātmaśuddhi* in the *Śaiva* context. Here, the rite is described burning up the ‘sinful body’ which is then ‘revived by water of life.’ Specifically, one should meditate “upon the bīja of the Fire of Destruction, which resembles the Apocalyptic Fire,” and,

He should then burn his own body [in meditation] and cause it to overflow with Water-of-Life [*variṇāplāvayet*]. Having burnt his

¹⁴⁹ Davis (1991), pg. 58.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, pg. 59.

mortal body so that it as it were is left as a heap of ashes, he should then meditate on a ‘body of wisdom’ [*vidyādeham*] which is [constituted] by showers of Water-of-Life [*amṛtadhārābhir*]; and on the Supreme Syllable *Om*, directed downwards, [with Amṛta] streaming on one’s head.¹⁵¹

As in external rites, internalized fire functions to purify via destruction while water functions to regenerate life.

Gavin Flood discusses the *bhūtaśuddhi* rite in the *Pancarātra* (*Vaiṣṇava tantra*) context as a parallel process. *Bhūtaśuddhi*,¹⁵² performed as an independent daily rite (*nityakarma*) as well as a preliminary to other ritual ceremonies, closely resembles *ātmaśuddhi* in the *Śaiva tantra* systems.

Flood looks particularly at one chapter in *Jayakhyā Samhitā*, dated somewhere between 7th and 10th centuries, where the *bhūtaśuddhi* is prescribed based upon the *tantric* precept that ‘only a god can worship a god’. Flood argues that the rite is definitely *tantric* in nature, based on its absence from the orthodox *Vaikhānasa* texts as well as its close parallels found in the *Śaivāgamas*. The account offered in the *Jayakhyā Samhitā* perhaps represents the oldest known description.

Ritual sequences of *bhūtaśuddhi* consist of mentally visualizing the burning up of *saḍkośikas* (the six outer coverings, which include *śakī*, *prakṛti*, *jivadeha*, etc.) and replacing these with a ‘light’ *mantra* body, referred to as the ‘City of Eight’ (referring to the five subtle elements plus *buddhi*, *manas* and *ahamkāra*). The process is understood to function via the internalization of ritual fire and water.

¹⁵¹ VŚT 72-73; Translation by Goudriaan (1985, pg. 106-7) but skt. parantheses added by me.

¹⁵² *Bhūta* carries the double meaning of ‘element’ and ‘demon.’ Therefore, *bhūtaśuddhi* can be translated either as ‘purification of elements’ or ‘purification from demons.’

The practitioner visualizes fire, starting at the big toe, arising up through the body and burning the various constituents that keep the practitioner in a state of bondage. The fire burns the *saḍkośikas* like “grass in a sacrificial fire.”

Starting with the seed syllable [the *praṇava*] and ending with the name expressing the fire of desire itself, [the practitioner] should visualize the body, blazing from the feet. After that, O Twice-Born, the fire is calmed and [the body] resembles a pile of ashes.¹⁵³

After this internal fire consumes the *saḍkośika*, *mantras* are imposed (*nyāsa*) upon the body of the practitioner to reconstruct a divine body that is in harmony with the *Pancarātra* hierarchical system. The imposition of *mantras* upon the body are described in terms of water—as a flood of streams flowing forth:

Meditating upon his reduction to ashes, [he should use the mantra *tyaṃ* preceded by the syllable *Om* and ending with *namaḥ*. Then he floods the ashes to the directions with the water, sprinkled with his own mantra, arising from his meditation and having the appearance of milk¹⁵⁴ . . . the nectar of the twice-born, continuously meditated upon, is made to fall as a mass of streams from its elevated position, flowing out from the fourth state¹⁵⁵

After the flood of *mantras* reconstruct the worshipper, he has a luminous quality.

The practitioner “should visualize [himself as] Lord Nārāyaṇa . . . shining with vibrant rays.”¹⁵⁶ After this stage, the practitioner is “reborn by means of energy from waveless place.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ JS10.74b-75

¹⁵⁴ JS10.76-77

¹⁵⁵ JS10.79b-80a

¹⁵⁶ JS10.81b-82

¹⁵⁷ JS10.87-88

In short, though tradition-specific terminology and ritual elements distinguish *tantric* practices, there do exist some common denominators that reveal an overarching *tantric* ritual universe. Initiation and purification rituals are practiced in order to transform the mind and body of the ritual practitioner. Fire burns fetters that keep one in a deluded state while water aids in the reconstruction of self—a self that resembles the deity located at the center of one’s ritual universe.

Instead of arguing that ritual complexity has lead to an obscuring of meaning, Staal dismisses meaning entirely. Though I agree that syntactic rules should be considered independently, I argue that these syntactic rules have meanings that come to be expressed in theologically specific ways—not just arbitrary meaning but meanings consistent with the larger ritual universes within which they develop.

All the ritual universes above represent examples of ritual complexity. In Vedic, Tantric, and Zoroastrian ritual universes, the interplay of fire and water tends to be governed by the same basic processes—burning is followed by moistening, destruction followed by regeneration. Ritual is practiced in order to connect the individual with the larger universe. Though the depiction of this larger universe differs from tradition to tradition, the mesocosmic function of ritual remains constant across Asian traditions.

Conclusion

This project began with the proposition that ‘Asian Ritual’ represents a more fundamental category of study than ‘Asian Religion.’ Ritual practice is, and always

has been, the most primary form of religiosity across the Asian continent. Ritual, unlike theology, is accessible to peoples of all religions and classes. Therefore, in order to understand 'Asian Religions' we should begin not with what people *believe* but with what people *do*. Ritual practice represents a concrete manifestation of what Asian peoples believe. But, unlike the study of theology, it is not an abstracted imposition. This does not mean that we can completely divorce syntax/orthopraxy from semantics/orthodoxy. Certainly, any ritual participant performs, sponsors, or observes the rituals from within a particular ritual universe. Semantics are part of that universe. However, it should be remembered that ritual is the primary form of religiosity. 'Religion' represents the after thought.

By investigating shared Asian ritual technologies, particularly in regards to fire sacrifice, this manuscript offers several new interrelated hypotheses. First, it proposes that traditional religious and geographical categories do not represent an appropriate model for understanding ritual practice. Rather, ritual development is characterized by continual contact and exchange between peoples from a variety of regions and religions. Therefore, instead of necessarily beginning from within a particular tradition, we should look to practices that transcend religious affiliation and geographical specificity.

Next, this manuscript argues against the oft-repeated claim, made most clearly by Kane, that ritual sacrifice in South Asia historically has been subordinated to or replaced by devotional practices. Far from being subordinated or declining in popularity, fire sacrifices such as *homa* rites continue to be performed daily by

practitioners belonging to Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Shinto, and other groups across South, Central, and East Asia. Though the meaning of fire sacrifice changes contextually, there can be no question that the sacrifices provide meaning to those who sponsor, perform, or witness the rites.

Finally, this manuscript challenges the proposition made by Staal and many others that Vedic sacrifice represents the oldest and most comprehensive source material for the study of ritual. As an alternate starting point, I propose that the ritual field surrounding *homa* rites offers a much more comprehensive source material from which to construct a theory of ritual. Not only are the central elements of *homa* sequences much more ancient than the elaborate *śrauta* rites, they are far more widespread; being practiced widely throughout the world today by multiple sects and religious groups. Unlike the elite *śrauta* rites, *homa* fire sacrifices comprise an essential element of lay religiosity and, thus, are much more mainstream than *śrauta* rites ever were. While allegedly Vedic in origin, *homa* encompasses a far wider field of living practice and, thus, represents a very rich, and largely undermined, field of study.

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